THE SECRET HOUSE

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THE SECRET HOUSE

CHAPTER I

A man stood irresolutely before the imposing portals of Cainbury House, a large office building let out to numerous small tenants, and harbouring, as the indicator on the tiled wall of the vestibule testified, some thirty different professions. The man was evidently poor, for his clothes were shabby and his boots were down at heel. He was as evidently a foreigner. His clean-shaven eagle face was sallow, his eyes were dark, his eyebrows black and straight.

He passed up the few steps into the hall and stood thoughtfully before the indicator. Presently he found what he wanted. At the very top of the list and amongst the crowded denizens of the fifth floor was a slip inscribed:

"THE GOSSIP'S CORNER"

He took from his waistcoat pocket a newspaper cutting and compared the two then stepped briskly, almost jauntily, into the hall, as though all his doubts and uncertainties had vanished, and waited for the elevator. His coat was buttoned tightly, his collar was frayed, his shirt had seen the greater part of a week's service, the Derby hat on his head had undergone extensive renovations, and a close observer would have noticed that his gloves were odd ones.

He walked into the lift and said, "Fifth floor," with a slight foreign accent.

He was whirled up, the lift doors clanged open and the grimy finger of the elevator boy indicated the office. Again the man hesitated, examining the door carefully. The upper half was of toughened glass and bore the simple inscription:

"THE GOSSIP'S CORNER.
KNOCK."

Obediently the stranger knocked and the door opened through an invisible agent, much to the man's surprise, though there was nothing more magical

about the phenomenon than there is about any electrically controlled office door.

He found himself in a room sparsely furnished with a table, a chair and a few copies of papers. An old school map of England hung on one wall and a Landseer engraving on the other. At the farthermost end of the room was another door, and to this he gravitated and again, after a moment's hesitation, he knocked.

"Come in," said a voice.

He entered cautiously.

The room was larger and was comfortably furnished. There were shaded electric lamps on either side of the big carved oak writing-table. One of the walls was covered with books, and the litter of proofs upon the table suggested that this was the sanctorum.

But the most remarkable feature of the room was the man who sat at the desk. He was a man solidly built and, by his voice, of middle age. His face the new-comer could not see and for excellent reason. It was hidden behind a veil of fine silk net which had been adjusted over the head like a loose bag and tightened under the chin.

The man at the table chuckled when he saw the other's surprise.

"Sit down," he said—he spoke in French—"and don't, I beg of you, be alarmed."

"Monsieur," said the new-comer easily, "be assured that I am not alarmed. In this world nothing has ever alarmed me except my own distressing poverty and the prospect of dying poor."

The veiled figure said nothing for a while.

"You have come in answer to my advertisement," he said after a long pause.

The other bowed.

"You require an assistant, Monsieur," said the new-comer, "discreet, with a knowledge of foreign languages and poor. I fulfill all those requirements," he went on calmly; "had you also added, of an adventurous disposition, with few if any scruples, it would have been equally descriptive."

The stranger felt that the man at the desk was looking at him, though he could not see his eyes. It must have been a long and careful scrutiny, for presently the advertiser said gruffly:

"I think you'll do."

"Exactly," said the new-comer with cool assurance; "and now it is for you, dear Monsieur, to satisfy me that you also will do. You will have observed that there are two parties to every bargain. First of all, my duties?"

The man in the chair leant back and thrust his hands into his pockets.

"I am the editor of a little paper which circulates exclusively amongst the servants of the upper classes," he said. "I receive from time to time interesting communications concerning the aristocracy and gentry of this country, written by hysterical French maids and revengeful Italian valets. I am not a good linguist, and I feel that there is much in these epistles which I miss and which I should not miss."

The new-comer nodded.

"I therefore want somebody of discretion who will deal with my foreign correspondence, make a fair copy in English and summarize the complaints which these good people make. You quite understand," he said with a shrug of his shoulders, "that mankind is not perfect, less perfect is womankind, and least perfect is that section of mankind which employs servants. They usually have stories to tell not greatly to their masters' credit, not nice stories, you understand, my dear friend. By the way, what is your name?"

The stranger hesitated.

"Poltavo," he said after a pause.

"Italian or Pole?" asked the other.

"Pole," replied Poltavo readily.

"Well, as I was saying," the editor went on, "we on this paper are very anxious to secure news of society doings. If they are printable, we print them; if they are not printable"—he paused—"we do not print them. But," he raised a warning forefinger, "the fact that particulars of disgraceful happenings are not fit for publication must not induce you to cast such stories into the wastepaper basket. We keep a record of such matters for our own private amusement." He said this latter airily, but Poltavo was not deceived.

Again there was a long silence whilst the man at the table ruminated.

"Where do you live?" he asked.

"On the fourth floor of a small house in Bloomsbury," replied Poltavo.

The veiled figure nodded.

"When did you come to this country?"

"Six months ago."

"Why?"

Poltavo shrugged his shoulders.

"Why?" insisted the man at the table.

"A slight matter of disagreement between myself and the admirable chief of police of Sans Sebastian," he said as airily as the other.

Again the figure nodded.

"If you had told me anything else, I should not have engaged you," he said.

"Why?" asked Poltavo in surprise.

"Because you are speaking the truth," said the other coolly. "Your matter of disagreement with the police in Sans Sebastian was over the missing of some money in the hotel where you were staying. The room happened to be next to yours and communicating, if one had the ingenuity to pick the

lock of the door. Also your inability to pay the hotel bill hastened your departure."

"What an editor!" said the other admiringly, but without showing any signs of perturbation or embarrassment.

"It is my business to know something about everybody," said the editor. "By the way, you may call me Mr. Brown, and if at times I may seem absent-minded when I am so addressed you must excuse me, because it is not my name. Yes, you are the kind of man I want."

"It is remarkable that you should have found me," said Poltavo. "The cutting"—he indicated the newspaper clip—"was sent to me by an unknown friend."

"I was the unknown friend," said "Mr. Brown"; "do you understand the position?"

Poltavo nodded.

"I understand everything," he said, "except the last and most important of all matters; namely, the question of my salary."

The man named a sum—a generous sum to Poltavo, and Mr. Brown, eyeing him keenly, was glad to note that his new assistant was neither surprised nor impressed.

"You will see very little of me at this office," the editor went on. "If you work well, and I can trust you, I will double the salary I am giving you; if you fail me, you will be sorry for yourself."

He rose.

"That finishes our interview. You will come here to-morrow morning and let yourself in. Here is the key of the door and a key to the safe in which I keep all correspondence. You will find much to incriminate society and precious little that will incriminate me. I expect you to devote the whole of your attention to this business," he said slowly and emphatically.

"You may be sure——" began Poltavo.

"Wait, I have not finished. By devoting the whole of your attention to the business, I mean I want you to have no spare time to conduct any investigations as to my identity. By a method which I will not trouble to explain to you I am able to leave this building without any person being aware of the fact that I am the editor of this interesting publication. When you have been through your letters I want you to translate those which contain the most important particulars and forward them by a messenger who will call every evening at five o'clock. Your salary will be paid regularly, and you will not be bothered with any editorial duties. And now, if you will please go into the outer room and wait a few moments, you may return in five minutes and begin on this accumulation of correspondence."

Poltavo, with a little bow, obeyed, and closed the door carefully behind him. He heard a click, and knew that the same electric control which had opened the outer door had now closed the inner. At the end of five minutes, as near as he could judge, he tried the door. It opened readily and he stepped into the inner office. The room was empty. There was a door leading out to the corridor, but something told the new assistant that this was not the manner of egress which his employer had adopted. He looked round carefully. There was no other door, but behind the chair where the veiled man had sat was a large cupboard. This he opened without, however, discovering any solution to the mystery of Mr. Brown's disappearance, for the cupboard was filled with books and stationery. He then began a systematic search of the apartment. He tried all the drawers of the desk and found they were open, whereupon his interest in their contents evaporated, since he knew a gentleman of Mr. Brown's wide experience was hardly likely to leave important particulars concerning himself in an unlocked desk. Poltavo shrugged his shoulders, deftly rolling a cigarette, which he lit, then pulling the chair up to the desk he began to attack the pile of letters which awaited his attention.

For six weeks Mr. Poltavo had worked with painstaking thoroughness in the new service. Every Friday morning he had found on his desk an

envelope containing two bank notes neatly folded and addressed to himself. Every evening at five o'clock a hard-faced messenger had called and received a bulky envelope containing Poltavo's translations.

The Pole was a keen student of the little paper, which he bought every week, and he had noted that very little of the information he had gleaned appeared in print. Obviously then *Gossip's Corner* served Mr. Brown in some other way than as a vehicle for scandal, and the veil was partly lifted on this mysterious business on an afternoon when there had come a sharp tap at the outer door of the office. Poltavo pressed the button on the desk, which released the lock, and presently the tap was repeated on the inside door.

The door opened and a girl stood in the entrance hesitating.

"Won't you come in?" said Poltavo, rising.

"Are you the editor of this paper?" asked the girl, as she slowly closed the door behind her.

Poltavo bowed. He was always ready to accept whatever honour chance bestowed upon him. Had she asked him if he were Mr. Brown, he would also have bowed.

"I had a letter from you," said the girl, coming to the other side of the table and resting her hand on its edge and looking down at him a little scornfully, and a little fearfully, as Poltavo thought.

He bowed again. He had not written letters to anybody save to his employer, but his conscience was an elastic one.

"I write so many letters," he said airily, "that I really forget whether I have written to you or not. May I see the letter?"

She opened her bag, took out an envelope, removed the letter and passed it across to the interested young man. It was written on the note-heading of *Gossip's Corner,* but the address had been scratched out by a stroke of the pen. It ran:

"DEAR MADAM,—

"Certain very important information has come into my possession regarding the relationships between yourself and Captain Brackly. I feel sure you cannot know that your name is being associated with that officer. As the daughter and heiress of the late Sir George Billk, you may imagine that your wealth and position in society relieves you of criticism, but I can assure you that the stories which have been sent to me would, were they placed in the hands of your husband, lead to the most unhappy consequences.

"In order to prevent this matter going any further, and in order to silence the voices of your detractors, our special inquiry department is willing to undertake the suppression of these scandal-mongers. It will cost you £10,000, which should be paid to me in notes. If you agree, put an advertisement in the agony column of the *Morning Mist*, and I will arrange a meeting where the money can be paid over. On no account address me at my office or endeavour to interview me there.

"Yours very truly,

"J. BROWN."

Poltavo read the letter and now the function of *Gossip's Corner* was very clear. He refolded the letter and handed it back to the girl.

"I may not be very clever," said the visitor, "but I think I can understand what blackmail is when I see it."

Poltavo was in a quandary, but only for a moment.

"I did not write that letter," he said suavely; "it was written without my knowledge. When I said that I was the editor of this paper, I meant, of course, that I was the acting editor. Mr. Brown conducts his business quite independently of myself. I know all the circumstances," he added hastily,

since he was very anxious that the girl should not refuse him further information in the belief that he was an inconsiderable quantity, "and I sympathize with you most sincerely."

A little smile curled the lips of the visitor.

Poltavo was ever a judge of men and women, and he knew that this was no yielding, timid creature to be terrified by the fear of exposure.

"The matter can be left in the hands of Captain Brackly and my husband to settle," she said. "I am going to take the letter to my solicitors. I shall also show it to the two men most affected."

Now the letter had been written four days earlier, as Poltavo had seen, and he argued that if it had not been revealed to these "two men most affected" in the first heat of the lady's anger and indignation, it would never be shown at all.

"I think you are very wise," he said suavely. "After all, what is a little unpleasantness of that character? Who cares about the publication of a few letters?"

"Has he got letters?" asked the girl quickly, with a change of tone.

Poltavo bowed again.

"Will they be returned?" she asked.

Poltavo nodded, and the girl bit her lips thoughtfully.

"I see," she said.

She looked at the letter again and without another word went out.

Poltavo accompanied her to the outer door.

"It is the prettiest kind of blackmail," she said at parting, and she spoke without heat. "I have only now to consider which will pay me best."

The Pole closed the door behind her and walked back to his inner office, opened the door and stood aghast, for sitting in the chair which he had so recently vacated was the veiled man.

He was chuckling, partly at Poltavo's surprise, partly at some amusing thought.

"Well done, Poltavo," he said; "excellently fenced."

"Did you hear?" asked the Pole, surprised in spite of himself.

"Every word," said the other. "Well, what do you think of it?"

Poltavo pulled a chair from the wall and sat down facing his chief.

"I think it is very clever," he said admiringly, "but I also think I am not getting sufficient salary."

The veiled man nodded.

"I think you are right," he agreed, "and I will see that it is increased. What a fool the woman was to come here!"

"Either a fool or a bad actress," said Poltavo.

"What do you mean?" asked the other quickly.

Poltavo shrugged his shoulders.

"To my mind," he said after a moment's thought, "there is no doubt that I have witnessed a very clever comedy. An effective one, I grant, because it has accomplished all that was intended."

"And what was intended?" asked Mr. Brown curiously.

"It was intended by you and carried out by you in order to convey to me the exact character of your business," said Poltavo. "I judged that fact from the following evidence." He ticked off the points one by one on his long white fingers. "The lady's name was, according to the envelope, let us say, Lady Cruxbury; but the lady's real name, according to some silver initials on her bag, began with 'G.' Those initials I also noted on the little handkerchief she took from her bag. Therefore she was not the person to whom the letter was addressed, or if she was, the letter was a blind. In such an important matter Lady Cruxbury would come herself. My own view is that there is no Lady Cruxbury, that the whole letter was concocted and was delivered to me whilst you were watching me from some hiding

place in order to test my discretion, and, as I say, to make me wise in the ways of your admirable journal."

Mr. Brown laughed long and softly.

"You are a clever fellow, Poltavo," he said admiringly, "and you certainly deserve your rise of salary. Now I am going to be frank with you. I admit that the whole thing was a blind. You now know my business, and you now know my *raison d'être*, so to speak. Are you willing to continue?"

"At a price," said the other.

"Name it," said the veiled man quietly.

"I am a poor adventurer," began Poltavo; "my life——"

"Cut all that stuff out," said Mr. Brown roughly, "I am not going to give you a fortune. I am going to give you the necessities of life and a little comfort."

Poltavo walked to the window and thrusting his hands deep into his trouser pockets stared out. Presently he turned. "The necessities of life to me," he said, "are represented by a flat in St. James's Street, a car, a box at the Opera——"

"You will get none of these," interrupted Mr. Brown. "Be reasonable."

Poltavo smiled.

"I am worth a fortune to you," he said, "because I have imagination. Here, for example." He picked out a letter from a heap on the desk and opened it. The caligraphy was typically Latin and the handwriting was vile. "Here is a letter from an Italian," he said, "which to the gross mind may perhaps represent wearisome business details. To a mind of my calibre, it is clothed in rich possibilities." He leaned across the table; his eyes lighted up with enthusiasm. "There may be an enormous fortune in this," and he tapped the letter slowly. "Here is a man who desires the great English newspaper, of which he has heard (though Heaven only knows how he can have heard it), to discover the whereabouts and the identity of a certain M. Fallock."

The veiled man started.

"Fallock," he repeated.

Poltavo nodded.

"Our friend Fallock has built a house 'of great wonder,' to quote the letter of our correspondent. In this house are buried millions of lira—doesn't that fire your imagination, dear colleague?"

"Built a house, did he?" repeated the other.

"Our friends tell me," Poltavo went on,—"did I tell you it was written on behalf of two men?—that they have a clue and in fact that they know Mr. Fallock's address, and they are sure he is engaged in a nefarious business, but they require confirmation of their knowledge."

The man at the table was silent.

His fingers drummed nervously on the blotting pad and his head was sunk forward as a man weighing a difficult problem.

"All child's talk," he said roughly, "these buried treasures!—I have heard of them before. They are just two imaginative foreigners. I suppose they want you to advance their fare?"

"That is exactly what they do ask," said Poltavo.

The man at the desk laughed uneasily behind his veil and rose.

"It's the Spanish prison trick," he said; "surely you are not deceived by that sort of stuff?"

Poltavo shrugged his shoulders.

"Speaking as one who has also languished in a Spanish prison," he smiled, "and who has also sent out invitations to the generous people of England to release him from his sad position—a release which could only be made by generous payments—I thoroughly understand the delicate workings of that particular fraud; but we robbers of Spain, dear colleague, do not write in our native language, we write in good, or bad, English. We write not in vilely spelt Italian because we know that the recipient of our letter will not

take the trouble to get it translated. No, this is no Spanish prison trick. This is genuine."

"May I see the letter?"

Poltavo handed it across the table, and the man turning his back for a moment upon his assistant lifted his veil and read. He folded the letter and put it in his pocket.

"I will think about it," he said gruffly.

"Another privilege I would crave from you in addition to the purely nominal privilege of receiving more salary," said Poltavo.

"What is it?"

The Pole spread out his hands in a gesture of self-depreciation.

"It is weak of me, I admit," he said, "but I am anxious—foolishly anxious—to return to the society of well-clothed men and pretty women. I pine for social life. It is a weakness of mine," he added apologetically. "I want to meet stockbrokers, financiers, politicians and other *chevaliers d'industrie* on equal terms, to wear the *grande habit*, to listen to soft music, to drink good wine."

"Well?" asked the other suspiciously. "What am I to do?"

"Introduce me to society," said Poltavo sweetly—"most particularly do I desire to meet that merchant prince of whose operations I read in the newspapers, Mr. how-do-you-call-him?—Farrington."

The veiled man sat in silence for a good minute, and then he rose, opened the cupboard and put in his hand. There was a click and the cupboard with its interior swung back, revealing another room which was in point of fact an adjoining suite of offices, also rented by Mr. Brown. He stood silently in the opening, his chin on his breast, his hands behind him, then:

"You are very clever, Poltavo," he said, and passed through and the cupboard swung back in its place.

CHAPTER II

"Assassin!"

This was the cry which rang out in the stillness of the night, and aroused the interest of one inhabitant of Brakely Square who was awake. Mr. Gregory Farrington, a victim of insomnia, heard the sound, and put down the book he was reading, with a frown. He rose from his easy chair, pulled his velvet dressing gown lightly round his rotund form and shuffled to the window. His blinds were lowered, but these were of the ordinary type, and he stuck two fingers between two of the laths.

There was a moist film on the window through which the street lamps showed blurred and indistinct, and he rubbed the pane clear with the tips of his fingers (he described every action to T. B. Smith afterwards).

Two men stood outside the house. They occupied the centre of the deserted pavement, and they were talking excitedly. Through the closed window Mr. Farrington could hear the staccato rattle of their voices, and by the gesticulations, familiar to one who had lived for many years in a Latin country, he gathered that they were of that breed.

He saw one raise his hand to strike the other and caught the flash of a pistol-barrel excitedly flourished.

"Humph!" said Mr. Farrington.

He was alone in his beautiful house in Brakely Square. His butler, the cook, and one sewing maid and the chauffeur were attending the servants' ball which the Manley-Potters were giving. Louder grew the voices on the pavement.

"Thief!" shrilled a voice in French, "Am I to be robbed of——" and the rest was indistinguishable.

There was a policeman on point duty at the other side of the square. Mr. Farrington's fingers rubbed the glass with greater energy, and his anxious

eyes looked left and right for the custodian of the law.

He crept down the stairs, opened the metal flap of the letter-box and listened. It was not difficult to hear all they said, though they had dropped their voices, for they stood at the foot of the steps.

"What is the use?" said one in French. "There is a reward large enough for two—but for him—my faith! there is money to be made, sufficient for twenty. It is unfortunate that we should meet on similar errands, but I swear to you I did not desire to betray you——" The voice sank.

Mr. Farrington chewed the butt of his cigar in the darkness of the hall and pieced together the jigsaw puzzle of this disjointed conversation. These men must be associates of Montague—Montague Fallock, who else?

Montague Fallock, the blackmailer for whom the police of Europe were searching, and individually and separately they had arranged to blackmail him—or betray him.

The fact that T. B. Smith also had a house in Brakely Square, and that T. B. Smith was an Assistant Commissioner of the police, and most anxious to meet Montague Fallock in the flesh, might supply reason enough to the logical Mr. Farrington for this conversation outside his respectable door.

"Yes, I tell you," said the second man, angrily, "that I have arranged to see M'sieur—you must trust me——"

"We go together," said the other, definitely, "I trust no man, least of all a confounded Neapolitan——"

Constable Habit had not heard the sound of quarrelling voices, as far as could be gathered from subsequent inquiry. His statement, now in the possession of T. B. Smith, distinctly says, "I heard nothing unusual."

But suddenly two shots rang out.

"Clack—clack!" they went, the unmistakable sound of an automatic pistol or pistols, then a police whistle shrieked, and P. C. Habit broke into a run in the direction of the sound, blowing his own whistle as he ran.

He arrived to find three men, two undoubtedly dead on the ground, and the third, Mr. Farrington's unpicturesque figure, standing shivering in the doorway of his house, a police whistle at his lips, and his grey velvet dressing-gown flapping in a chill eastern wind.

Ten minutes later T. B. Smith arrived on the scene from his house, to find a crowd of respectable size, half the bedroom windows of Brakely Square occupied by the morbid and the curious, and the police ambulance already on the spot.

"Dead, sir," reported the constable.

T. B. looked at the men on the ground. They were obviously foreigners. One was well, almost richly dressed; the other wore the shabby evening dress of a waiter, under the long ulster which covered him from neck to foot.

The men lay almost head to head. One flat on his face (he had been in this position when the constable found him, and had been restored to that position when the methodical P. C. Habit found that he was beyond human assistance) and the other huddled on his side.

The police kept the crowd at a distance whilst the head of the secret police (T. B. Smith's special department merited that description) made a careful examination. He found a pistol on the ground, and another under the figure of the huddled man, then as the police ambulance was backed to the pavement, he interviewed the shivering Mr. Farrington.

"If you will come upstairs," said that chilled millionaire, "I will tell you all I know."

T. B. sniffed the hall as he entered, but said nothing. He had his olfactory sense developed to an abnormal degree, but he was a tactful and a silent man.

He knew Mr. Farrington—who did not?—both as a new neighbour and as the possessor of great wealth.

"Your daughter——" he began.

"My ward," corrected Mr. Farrington, as he switched on all the lights of his sitting-room, "she is out—in fact she is staying the night with my friend Lady Constance Dex—do you know her?"

T. B. nodded.

"I can only give you the most meagre information," said Mr. Farrington. He was white and shaky, a natural state for a law-abiding man who had witnessed wilful murder. "I heard voices and went down to the door, thinking I would find a policeman—then I heard two shots almost simultaneously, and opened the door and found the two men as they were found by the policeman."

"What were they talking about?"

Mr. Farrington hesitated.

"I hope I am not going to be dragged into this case as a witness?" he asked, rather than asserted, but received no encouragement in the spoken hope from T. B. Smith.

"They were discussing that notorious man, Montague Fallock," said the millionaire; "one was threatening to betray him to the police."

"Yes," said T. B. It was one of those "yesses" which signified understanding and conviction.

Then suddenly he asked:

"Who was the third man?"

Mr. Farrington's face went from white to red, and to white again.

"The third man?" he stammered.

"I mean the man who shot those two," said T. B., "because if there is one thing more obvious than another it is that they were both killed by a third

person. You see," he went on, "though they had pistols neither had been discharged—that was evident, because on each the safety catch was raised. Also the lamp-post near which they stood was chipped by a bullet which neither could have fired. I suggest, Mr. Farrington, that there was a third man present. Do you object to my searching your house?"

A little smile played across the face of the other.

"I haven't the slightest objection," he said. "Where will you start?"

"In the basement," said T. B.; "that is to say, in your kitchen."

The millionaire led the way down the stairs, and descended the back stairway which led to the domain of the absent cook. He turned on the electric light as they entered.

There was no sign of an intruder.

"That is the cellar door," indicated Mr. Farrington, "this the larder, and this leads to the area passage. It is locked."

T. B. tried the handle, and the door opened readily.

"This at any rate is open," he said, and entered the dark passageway.

"A mistake on the part of the butler," said the puzzled Mr. Farrington. "I have given the strictest orders that all these doors should be fastened. You will find the area door bolted and chained."

T. B. threw the rays of his electric torch over the door.

"It doesn't seem to be," he remarked; "in fact, the door is ajar."

Farrington gasped.

"Ajar?" he repeated. T. B. stepped out into the well of the tiny courtyard. It was approached from the street by a flight of stone stairs.

T. B. threw the circle of his lamp over the flagged yard. He saw something glittering and stooped to pick it up. The object was a tiny gold-capped bottle such as forms part of the paraphernalia in a woman's handbag.

He lifted it to his nose and sniffed it.

"That is it," he said.

"What?" asked Mr. Farrington, suspiciously.

"The scent I detected in your hall," replied T. B. "A peculiar scent, is it not?" He raised the bottle to his nose again. "Not your ward's by any chance?"

Farrington shook his head vigorously.

"Doris has never been in this area in her life," he said; "besides, she dislikes perfumes."

T. B. slipped the bottle in his pocket.

Further examination discovered no further clue as to the third person, and T. B. followed his host back to the study.

"What do you make of it?" asked Mr. Farrington.

T. B. did not answer immediately. He walked to the window and looked out. The little crowd which had been attracted by the shots and arrival of the police ambulance had melted away. The mist which had threatened all the evening had rolled into the square and the street lamps showed yellow through the dingy haze.

"I think," he said, "that I have at last got on the track of Montague Fallock."

Mr. Farrington looked at him with open mouth.

"You don't mean that?" he asked incredulously.

T. B. inclined his head.

"The open door below—the visitor?" jerked the stout man, "you don't think Montague Fallock was in the house to-night?"

T. B. nodded again, and there was a moment's silence.

"He has been blackmailing me," said Mr. Farrington, thoughtfully, "but I don't think——"

The detective turned up his coat collar preparatory to leaving.

"I have a rather unpleasant job," he said. "I shall have to search those unfortunate men."

Mr. Farrington shivered. "Beastly," he said, huskily.

T. B. glanced round the beautiful apartment with its silver fittings, its soft lights and costly panellings. A rich, warm fire burnt in an oxidized steel grate. The floor was a patchwork of Persian rugs, and a few pictures which adorned the walls must have been worth a fortune.

On the desk there was a big photograph in a plain silver frame—the photograph of a handsome woman in the prime of life.

"Pardon me," said T. B., and crossed to the picture, "this is——"

"Lady Constance Dex," said the other, shortly—"a great friend of mine and my ward's."

"Is she in town?"

Mr. Farrington shook his head.

"She is at Great Bradley," he said; "her brother is the rector there."

"Great Bradley?"

T. B.'s frown showed an effort to recollect something.

"Isn't that the locality which contains the Secret House?"

"I've heard something about the place," said Mr. Farrington with a little smile.

"C. D.," said the detective, making for the door.

"What?"

"Lady Constance Dex's initials, I mean," said T. B.

"Yes—why?"

"Those are the initials on the gold scent bottle, that is all," said the detective. "Good night."

He left Mr. Farrington biting his finger nails—a habit he fell into when he was seriously perturbed.

CHAPTER III

T. B. Smith sat alone in his office in Scotland Yard. Outside, the Embankment, the river, even the bulk of the Houses of Parliament were blotted out by the dense fog. For two days London had lain under the pall, and if the weather experts might be relied upon, yet another two days of fog was to be expected.

The cheery room, with its polished oak panelling and the chaste elegance of its electroliers, offered every inducement to a lover of comfort to linger. The fire glowed bright and red in the tiled fireplace, a silver clock on the mantelpiece ticked musically, and at his hand was a white-covered tray with a tiny silver teapot, and the paraphernalia necessary for preparing his meal—that strange tea-supper which was one of T. B. Smith's eccentricities.

He glanced at the clock; the hands pointed to twenty-five minutes past one.

He pressed a little button let into the side of the desk, and a few seconds later there was a gentle tap at the door, and a helmetless constable appeared.

"Go to the record room and get me"—he consulted a slip of paper on the desk—"Number G 7941."

The man withdrew noiselessly, and T. B. Smith poured out a cup of tea for himself.

There was a thoughtful line on his broad forehead, a look of unaccustomed worry on the handsome face, tanned with the suns of Southern France. He had come back from his holiday to a task which required the genius of a superman. He had to establish the identity of the greatest swindler of modern times, Montague Fallock. And now another reason existed for his search. To Montague Fallock, or his agent, must be ascribed the death of two men found in Brakely Square the night before.

No man had seen Montague; there was no photograph to assist the army of detectives who were seeking him. His agents had been arrested and interrogated, but they were but the agents of agents. The man himself was invisible. He stood behind a steel network of banks and lawyers and anonymities, unreachable.

The constable returned, bearing under his arm a little black leather envelope, and, depositing it on the desk of the Assistant Commissioner, withdrew.

T. B. opened the envelope and removed three neat packages tied with red tape. He unfastened one of these and laid three cards before him. They were three photographic enlargements of a finger print. It did not need the eye of an expert to see they were of the same finger, though it was obvious that they had been made under different circumstances.

T. B. compared them with a smaller photograph he had taken from his pocket. Yes, there was no doubt about it. The four pictures, secured by a delicate process from the almost invisible print on the latest letter of the blackmailer, proved beyond any doubt the identity of Lady Dex's correspondent.

He rang the bell again and the constable appeared in the doorway.

"Is Mr. Ela in his office?"

"Yes, sir. He's been taking information about that Dock case."

"Dock case? Oh yes, I remember; two men were caught rifling the Customs store; they shot a dock constable and got away."

"They both got away, sir," said the man, "but one was shot by the constable's mate; they found his blood on the pavement outside where their motor-car was waiting."

T. B. nodded.

"Ask Mr. Ela to come in when he is through," he said.

Mr. Ela was evidently "through," for almost immediately after the message had gone, the long, melancholy face of the superintendent

appeared in the doorway.

"Come in, Ela," smiled T. B.; "tell me all your troubles."

"My main trouble," replied Ela, as he sank wearily into the padded chair, "is to induce eyewitnesses to agree as to details; there is absolutely no clue as to the identity of the robbers, and nearly murderers. The number of the car was a spurious one, and was not traced beyond Limehouse. I am up against a blank wall. The only fact I have to go upon is the very certain fact that one of the robbers was either wounded or killed and carried to the car by his friend, and that his body will have to turn up somewhere or other—then we may have something to go on."

"If it should prove to be that of my friend Montague Fallock," said T. B. humorously, "I shall be greatly relieved. What were your thieves after—bullion?"

"Hardly! No, they seem to be fairly prosaic pilferers. They engaged in going through a few trunks—part of the personal baggage of the *Mandavia* which arrived from Coast ports on the day previous. The baggage was just heavy truck; the sort of thing that a passenger leaves in the docks for a day or two till he has arranged for their carriage. The trunks disturbed, included one of the First Secretary to a High Commissioner in Congoland, a dress basket of a Mrs. Somebody-or-other whose name I forget—she is the wife of a Commissioner—and a small box belonging to Dr. Goldworthy, who has just come back from the Congo where he has been investigating sleeping sickness."

"Doesn't sound thrilling," said T. B. thoughtfully; "but why do swagger criminals come in their motor-cars with their pistols and masks—they were masked if I remember the printed account aright?" Ela nodded. "Why do they come on so prosaic an errand?"

"Tell me," said Ela, laconically, then, "What is your trouble?"

"Montague," said the other, with a grim smile, "Montague Fallock, Esquire. He has been demanding a modest ten thousand pounds from Lady Constance Dex—Lady Constance being a sister of the Hon. and Rev. Harry Dex, Vicar of Great Bradley. The usual threat—exposure of an old love affair.

"Dex is a large, bland aristocrat under the thumb of his sister; the lady, a masterful woman, still beautiful; the indiscretion partly atoned by the death of the man. He died in Africa. Those are the circumstances that count. The brother knows, but our friend Montague will have it that the world should know. He threatens to murder, if necessary, should she betray his demands to the police. This is not the first time he has uttered this threat. Farrington, the millionaire, was the last man, and curiously, a friend of Lady Dex."

"It's weird—the whole business," mused Ela. "The two men you found in the square didn't help you?"

T. B., pacing the apartment with his hand in his pocket, shook his head.

"Ferreira de Coasta was one, and Henri Sans the other. Both men undoubtedly in the employ of Montague, at some time or other. The former was a well-educated man, who may have acted as intermediary. He was an architect who recently got into trouble in Paris over money matters. Sans was a courier agent, a more or less trusted messenger. There was nothing on either body to lead me to Montague Fallock, save this."

He pulled open the drawer of his desk and produced a small silver locket. It was engraved in the ornate style of cheap jewellery and bore a half-obliterated monogram.

He pried open the leaf of the locket with his thumbnail. There was nothing in its interior save a small white disc.

"A little gummed label," explained T. B., "but the inscription is interesting."

Ela held the locket to the light, and read:

"Mor: Cot.
God sav the Keng."

"Immensely patriotic, but unintelligible and illiterate," said T. B., slipping the medallion into his pocket, and locking away the dossier in one of the drawers of his desk.

Ela yawned.

"I'm sorry—I'm rather sleepy. By the way, isn't Great Bradley, about which you were speaking, the home of a romance?"

T. B. nodded with a twinkle in his eye.

"It is the town which shelters the Secret House," he said, as he rose, "but the eccentricities of lovesick Americans, who build houses equally eccentric, are not matters for police investigation. You can share my car on a fog-breaking expedition as far as Chelsea," he added, as he slipped into his overcoat and pulled on his gloves; "we may have the luck to run over Montague."

"You are in the mood for miracles," said Ela, as they were descending the stairs.

"I am in the mood for bed," replied T. B. truthfully. Outside the fog was so thick that the two men hesitated. T. B.'s chauffeur was a wise and patient constable, but felt in his wisdom that patience would be wasted on an attempt to reach Chelsea.

"It's thick all along the road, sir," he said. "I've just 'phoned through to Westminster Police Station, and they say it is madness to attempt to take a car through the fog."

T. B. nodded.

"I'll sleep here," he said. "You'd better bed down somewhere, David, and you, Ela?"

"I'll take a little walk in the park," said the sarcastic Mr. Ela.

T. B. went back to his room, Ela following.

He switched on the light, but stood still in the doorway. In the ten minutes' absence some one had been there. Two drawers of the desk had been forced; the floor was littered with papers flung there hurriedly by the searcher.

T. B. stepped swiftly to the desk—the envelope had gone.

A window was open and the fog was swirling into the room.

"There's blood here," said Mr. Ela. He pointed to the dappled blotting pad.

"Cut his hand on the glass," said T. B. and jerked his head to the broken pane in the window. He peered out through the open casement. A hook ladder, such as American firemen use, was hanging to the parapet. So thick was the fog that it was impossible to see how long the ladder was, but the two men pulled it up with scarcely an effort. It was made of a stout light wood, with short steel brackets affixed at intervals.

"Blood on this too," said Ela, then, to the constable who had come to his ring, he jerked his orders rapidly: "Inspector on duty to surround the office with all the reserve—'phone Cannon Row all men available to circle Scotland Yard, and to take into custody a man with a cut hand—'phone all stations to that effect."

"There's little chance of getting our friend," said T. B. He took up a magnifying glass and examined the stains on the pad.

"Who was he?" asked Ela.

T. B. pointed to the stain.

"Montague," he said, briefly, "and he now knows the very thing I did not wish him to know."

"And that is?"

T. B. did not speak for a moment. He stood looking down at the evidence which the intruder had left behind.

"He knows how much I know," he said, grimly, "but he may also imagine I know more—there are going to be developments."

CHAPTER IV

It was a bad night in London, not wild or turbulent, but swathed to the eyes like an Eastern woman in a soft grey garment of fog. It engulfed the walled canyons of the city, through which the traffic had roared all day, plugged up the maze of dark side-streets, and blotted out the open squares. Close to the ground it was thick, viscous, impenetrable, so that one could not see a yard ahead, and walked ghostlike, adventuring into a strange world.

Occasionally it dispersed. In front of the Jollity Theatre numbers of arc-lights wrought a wavering mist-hung yellow space, into which a constant line of vehicles, like monstrous shiny beetles, emerged from the outer nowhere, disgorged their contents, and were eclipsed again. And pedestrians in gay processional streamed across the rudy glistening patch like figures on a slide.

Conspicuous in the shifting throng was a sharp-faced boy, ostensibly selling newspapers, but with a keen eye upon the arriving vehicles. Suddenly he darted to the curb, where an electric coupe had just drawn up. A man alighted heavily, and turned to assist a young woman.

For an instant the lad's attention was deflected by the radiant vision. The girl, wrapped in a voluminous cloak of ivory colour, was tall and slim, with soft white throat and graceful neck; her eyes under shadowy lashes were a little narrow, but blue as autumn mist, and sparkling now with amusement.

"Watch your steps, auntie," she warned laughingly, as a plump, elderly, little lady stepped stiffly from the coupe. "These London fogs are dangerous."

The boy stood staring at her, his feet as helpless as if they had taken root to the ground. Suddenly he remembered his mission. His native impudence reasserted itself, and he started forward.

"Paper, sir?"

He addressed the man. For a moment it seemed as though he were to be rebuffed, then something in the boy's attitude changed his mind.

As the man fumbled in an inner pocket for change, the lad took a swift inventory. The face beneath the tall hat was a powerful oval, paste-coloured, with thin lips, and heavy lines from nostril to jaw. The eyes were close set and of a turbid grey.

"It's him," the boy assured himself, and opened his mouth to speak.

The girl laughed amusedly at the spectacle of her companion's passion for news in this grimy atmosphere, and turned to the young man in evening dress who had just dismissed his taxi and joined the group.

It was the diversion the boy had prayed for. He took a quick step toward the older man.

"T. B. S.," he said, in a soft but distinct undertone.

The man's face blanched suddenly, and a coin which he held in his large, white-gloved palm slipped jingling to the pavement.

The young messenger stooped and caught it dexterously.

"T. B. S.," he whispered again, insistently.

"Here?" the answer came hoarsely. The man's lips trembled.

"Watchin' this theatre—splits [1] by the million," finished the boy promptly, and with satisfaction. Under cover of returning the coin, he thrust a slip of white paper into the other's hand.

[Footnote 1] Splits: detectives.

Then he wheeled, ducked to the girl with a gay little swagger of impudence, threw a lightning glance of scrutiny at her young escort, and turning, was lost in the throng.

The whole incident occupied less than a minute, and presently the four were seated in their box, and the gay strains from the overture of *The*

Strand Girl came floating up to them.

"I wish I were a little street gamin in London," said the girl pensively, fingering the violets at her corsage. "Think of the adventures! Don't you, Frank?"

Frank Doughton looked across at her with smiling significant eyes, which brought a flush to her cheeks.

"No," he said softly, "I do not!"

The girl laughed at him and shrugged her round white shoulders.

"For a young journalist, Frank, you are too obvious—too delightfully verdant. You should study indirection, subtlety, finesse—study our mutual friend Count Poltavo!"

She meant it mischievously, and produced the effect she desired.

At the name the young man's brow darkened.

"He isn't coming here to-night?" Doughton asked, in aggrieved tones.

The girl nodded, her eyes dancing with laughter.

"What can you see in that man, Doris?" he protested. "I'll bet you anything you like that the fellow's a rogue! A smooth, soft-smiling rascal! Lady Dinsmore," he appealed to the elder woman, "do you like him?"

"Oh, don't ask Aunt Patricia!" cried the girl. "She thinks him quite the most fascinating man in London. Don't deny it, auntie!"

"I shan't," said the lady, calmly, "for it's true! Count Poltavo"—she paused, to inspect through her lorgnette some new-comers in the opposite box, where she got just a glimpse of a grey dress in the misty depths of the box, the whiteness of a gloved hand lying upon the box's edge—"Count Poltavo is the only interesting man in London. He is a genius." She shut her lorgnette with a snap. "It delights me to talk with him. He smiles and murmurs gay witticisms and quotes Talleyrand and Lucullus, and all the while, in the back of his head, quite out of reach, his real opinions of you are being tabulated and ranged neatly in a row like bottles on a shelf."

Doris nodded thoughtfully.

"I'd like to take down some of those bottles," she said. "Some day perhaps I shall."

"They're probably labelled poison," remarked Frank viciously. He looked at the girl with a growing sense of injury. Of late she had seemed absolutely changed towards him; and from being his good friend, with established intimacies, she had turned before his very eyes into an alien, almost an enemy, more beautiful than ever, to be true, but perverse, mocking, impish. She flouted him for his youth, his bluntness, his guileless transparency. But hardest of all to bear was the delicate derision with which she treated his awkward attempts to express his passion for her, to speak of the fever which had taken possession of him, almost against his will. And now, he reflected bitterly, with this velvet fop of a count looming up as a possible rival, with his *savoir faire*, and his absurd penchant for literature and art, what chance had he, a plain Briton, against such odds?—unless, as he profoundly believed, the chap was a crook. He determined to sound her guardian.

"Mr. Farrington," he asked aloud, "what do *you* think—hallo!" He sprang up suddenly and thrust out a supporting arm.

Farrington had risen, and stood swaying slightly upon his feet. He was frightfully pale, and his countenance was contracted as if in pain. He lifted a wavering hand to his head.

With a supreme effort he steadied himself.

"Doris," he asked quickly, "I meant to ask you—where did you leave Lady Constance?"

The girl looked up in surprise.

"I haven't seen her to-day—she went down to Great Bradley last night—didn't she, auntie?"

The elder woman nodded.

"Mannish, and not a little discourteous *I* think," she said, "leaving her guests and motoring through the fog to the country. I sometimes think

Constance Dex is a trifle mad."

"I wish I could share your views," said Farrington, grimly.

He turned abruptly to Doughton.

"Look after Doris," he said. "I have remembered—an engagement."

He beckoned Frank, with a scarcely perceptible gesture, and the two men passed out of the box.

"Have you discovered anything?" he asked, when they were outside.

"About what?" asked Frank, innocently.

A grim smile broke the tense lines of Mr. Farrington's face.

"Really!" he said, drily, "for a young man engaged in most important investigations you are casual."

"Oh!—the Tollington business," said the other. "No, Mr. Farrington, I have found nothing. I don't think it is my game really—investigating and discovering people. I'm a pretty good short story writer but a pretty rotten detective. Of course, it is awfully kind of you to have given me the job ——"

"Don't talk nonsense," snapped the older man. "It isn't kindness—it's self-interest. Somewhere in this country is the heir to the Tollington millions. I am one of the trustees to that estate and I am naturally keen on discovering the man who will relieve me of my responsibility. There is a hundred pounds awaiting the individual who unearths this heir."

He glanced at his watch.

"There is one other thing I want to speak to you about—and that is Doris."

They stood in the little corridor which ran at the back of the boxes, and Frank wondered why he had chosen this moment to discuss such urgent and intimate matters. He was grateful enough to the millionaire for the commission he had given him—though with the information to go upon, looking for the missing Tollington heir was analogous to seeking the proverbial needle—but grateful for the opportunity which even this

association gave him for meeting Doris Gray, he was quite content to continue the search indefinitely.

"You know my views," the other went on—he glanced at his watch again. "I want Doris to marry you. She is a dear girl, the only human being in the world for whom I have any affection." His voice trembled, and none could doubt his sincerity. "Somehow I am getting nervous about things—that shooting which I witnessed the other night has made me jumpy—go in and win."

He offered a cold hand to the other, and Frank took it, then, with a little jerk of his head, and a muttered "shan't be gone long," he passed into the vestibule, and out into the foggy street. A shrill whistle brought a taxi from the gloom.

"The Savoy," said Farrington. He sprang in, and the cab started with a jerk.

A minute later he thrust his head from the window.

"You may drop me here," he called. He descended and paid his fare. "I'll walk the rest of the way," he remarked casually.

"Bit thickish on foot to-night, sir," offered the driver respectfully. "Better let me set you down at the hotel." But his fare was already lost in the enveloping mist.

Farrington wrapped his muffler closely about his chin, pulled down his hat to shadow his eyes, and hurried along like a man with a set destination.

Presently he halted and signalled to another cab, crawling along close to the curb.

CHAPTER V

The fog was still heavy, and the blurred street-lamps looked ghastly in the yellow mist, when the little newsboy messenger, the first half of his mission performed, struck briskly riverward to complete his business. He disposed of his papers by the simple expedient of throwing them into a street refuse-bin. He jumped on a passing 'bus, and after half an hour's cautious drive reached Southwark. He entered one of the narrow streets leading from the Borough. Here the gas lamps were fewer, and the intersecting streets more narrow and gloomy.

He plunged down a dark and crabbed way, glancing warily behind him now and then to see if he was being followed.

Here, between invisible walls, the fog hung thick and warm and sticky, crowding up close, with a kind of blowsy intimacy that whispered the atmosphere of the place. Occasionally, close to his ear, snatches of loose song burst out, or a coarse face loomed head-high through the reek.

But the boy was upon his native heath and scuttled along, whistling softly between closed teeth, as, with a dexterity born of long practice, he skirted slush and garbage sinks, slipped around the blacker gulfs that denoted unguarded basement holes, and eluded the hideous shadows that lurched by in the gloom.

Hugging the wall, he presently became aware of footsteps behind him. He rounded a corner, and, turning swiftly, collided with something which grabbed him with great hands. Without hesitation, the lad leaned down and set his teeth deep into the hairy arm.

The man let go with a hoarse bellow of rage and the boy, darting across the alley, could hear him stumbling after him in blind search of the narrow way.

As he sped along a door suddenly opened in the blank wall beside him, and a stream of ruddy light gushed out, catching him square within its

radiance, mud-spattered, starry-eyed, vivid.

A man stood framed in the doorway.

"Come in," he commanded, briefly.

The boy obeyed. Surreptitiously he wiped the wet and mud from his face and tried to reduce his wild breathing.

The room which he entered was meagre and stale-smelling, with bare floor and stained and sagging wall-paper; unfurnished save for a battered deal table and some chairs.

He sank into one of them and stared with frank curiosity past his employer, who had often entrusted him with messages requiring secrecy, past his employer's companion, to the third figure in the room—a prostrate figure which lay quite still under the heavy folds of a long dark ulster with its face turned to the wall.

"Well?" It was a singularly agreeable voice which aroused him, soft and well-bred, but with a faint foreign accent. The speaker was his employer, a slender dark man, with a finely carved face, immobile as the Sphinx. He had laid aside his Inverness and top hat, and showed himself in evening dress with a large—perhaps a thought too large—buttonhole of Parma violets, which sent forth a faint fragrance.

Of the personality of the man the messenger knew nothing more than that he was foreign, eccentric in a quiet way, lived in a grand house near Portland Place, and rewarded him handsomely for his occasional services. That the grand house was an hotel at which Poltavo had run up an uncomfortable bill he could not know.

The boy related his adventures of the evening, not omitting to mention his late pursuer.

The man listened quietly, brooding, his elbows upon the table, his inscrutable face propped in the crotch of his hand. A ruby, set quaintly in a cobra's head, gleamed from a ring upon his little finger. Presently he roused.

"That's all to-night, my boy," he said, gravely.

He drew out his purse, extracted a sovereign, and laid it in the messenger's hand.

"And this," he said, softly, holding up a second gold piece, "is for—discretion! You comprehend?"

The boy shot a swift glance, not unmixed with terror, at the still, recumbent figure in the corner, mumbled an assent and withdrew. Out in the dampness of the fog, he took a long, deep breath.

As the door closed behind him, the door of an inner room opened and Farrington came out. He had preceded the messenger by five minutes. The young exquisite leaned back in his chair, and smiled into the sombre eyes of his companion.

"At last!" he breathed, softly. "The thing moves. The wheels are beginning to revolve!"

The other nodded gloomily, his glance straying off toward the corner of the room.

"They've got to revolve a mighty lot more before the night's done!" he replied, with heavy significance.

"I needn't tell you," he continued, "that we must move in this venture with extreme caution. A single misstep at the outset, the slightest breath of suspicion, and pff! the entire superstructure falls to the ground."

"That is doubtless true, Mr. Farrington," murmured his companion, pleasantly. He leaned down to inhale the fragrant scent of the violets. "But you forget one little thing. This grand superstructure you speak of—so mysteriously"—he hid a slight smile—"I don't know it—all. You have seen fit, in your extreme caution, to withhold complete information from me."

He paused, and regarded his companion with a level, steady gaze. A faint, ironical smile played about the corners of his mouth; he spoke with a slightly foreign accent, which was at once pleasant and piquant.

"Is it not so, my friend?" he asked, softly. "I am—how you say—left out in the cold—I do not even know your immediate plans."

His countenance was serene and unruffled, and it was only by his slightly quickened breathing that the conversation held any unusual significance.

The other stirred uneasily in his chair.

"There are certain financial matters," he said, with a light air.

"There are others immediately pressing," interrupted his companion. "I observe, for example, that your right hand is covered by a glove which is much larger than that on your left. I imagine that beneath the white kid there is a thin silk bandage. Really, for a millionaire, Mr. Farrington, you are singularly—shall I say—'furtive'?"

"Hush!" whispered Farrington, hoarsely. He glanced about half-fearfully.

The younger man ignored the outburst. He laid a persuasive hand upon his companion's arm.

"My friend," he said gravely, "let me give you a bit of good advice. Believe me, I speak disinterestedly. Take me into your counsel. I think you need assistance—and I have already given you a taste of my quality in that respect. This afternoon when I called upon you in your home in Brakely Square, suggesting that a man of my standing might be of immense value to you, you were at first innocently dull, then suspicious. After I told you of my adventures in the office of a certain Society journal you were angry. Frankly," the young man shrugged his shoulders, "I am a penniless adventurer—can I be more frank than that? I call myself Count Poltavo—yet the good God knows that my family can give no greater justification to the claim of nobility than the indiscretions of lovely Lydia Poltavo, my grandmother, can offer. For the matter of that I might as well be prince on the balance of probability. I am living by my wits: I have cheated at cards, I have hardly stopped short of murder—I need the patronage of a strong wealthy man, and you fulfill all my requirements."

He bowed slightly to the other, and went on:

"You challenged me to prove my worth—I accepted that challenge. To-night, as you entered the theatre, you were told by a messenger that T. B. Smith—a most admirable man—was watching you—that he had practically surrounded the Jollity with detectives, and, moreover, I chose

as my messenger a small youth who has served you more than once. Thus at one stroke I proved that not only did I know what steps authority was taking to your undoing, but also that I had surprised this splendid rendezvous—and your secret."

He waived his hand around the sordid room, and his eyes rested awhile upon the silent, ulster-covered figure on the bed; his action was not without intent.

"You are an interesting man," said Farrington, gruffly. He looked at his watch. "Join my party at the Jollity," he said; "we can talk matters over. Incidentally, we may challenge Mr. Smith." He smiled, but grew grave again. "I have lost a good friend there"—he looked at the form on the bed; "there is no reason why you should not take his place. Is it true—what you said to-day—that you know something of applied mechanics?"

"I have a diploma issued by the College of Padua," said the other promptly.

CHAPTER VI

At precisely ten o'clock, as the curtain came reefing slowly down upon the first act of *The Strand Girl*, Lady Dinsmore turned with outstretched hand to greet the first of the two men who had just entered the box.

"My dear Count," she exclaimed, "I am disappointed in you! Here I have been paying you really quite tremendous compliments to these young people. I presume you are on Gregory's 'business'?"

"I am desolated!"

Count Poltavo had a way of looking at one gravely, with an air of concentrated attention, as if he were seeing through the words, into the very soul of the speaker. He was, indeed, a wonderful listener, and this quality, added to a certain buoyancy of temperament, accounted perhaps for his popularity in such society as he had been able to penetrate.

"Before I ask you to name the crime, Lady Dinsmore," he said, "permit me to offer my humblest apologies for my lateness."

Lady Dinsmore shook her head at him and glanced at Farrington, but that dour man had drawn a chair to the edge of the box, and was staring moodily down into the great auditorium.

"You are an incorrigible!" she declared, "but sit down and make your excuses at your leisure. You know my niece, and I think you have met Mr. Doughton. He is one of our future leaders of thought!"

The Count bowed, and sank into a chair beside his hostess.

Frank, after a frigidly polite acknowledgement, resumed his conversation with Doris, and Lady Dinsmore turned to her companion.

"Now for the explanation," she exclaimed, briskly. "I shall not let you off! Unpunctuality *is* a crime, and your punishment shall be to confess its cause."

Count Poltavo bent toward her with bright, smiling eyes.

"A very stupid and foolish business engagement," he replied, "which required my personal attendance, and unfortunately that of Mr. Farrington."

Lady Dinsmore threw up a protesting hand.

"Business has no charms to soothe my savage breast! Mr. Farrington," she lowered her voice confidentially, "can talk of nothing else. When he was staying with us he was for ever telegraphing, cabling to America, or decoding messages. There was no peace in the house, by day or by night. Finally I made a stand. 'Gregory,' I said, 'you shall not pervert my servants with your odious tips, and turn my home into a public stock-exchange. Take your bulls and bears over to the Savoy and play with them there, and leave Doris to me.' And he did!" she concluded triumphantly.

Count Poltavo looked about, as if noting for the first time Farrington's preoccupation. "Is he quite well?" he inquired, in an undertone.

Lady Dinsmore shrugged her shoulders.

"Frankly, I think he had a slight indisposition, and magnified it in order to escape small talk. He hates music. Doris has been quite distrait ever since. The child adores her uncle—you know, of course, that she is his niece—the daughter of my sister. Gregory was her father's brother—we are almost related."

Her companion glanced across to the subject of their remarks. The girl sat in the front of the box, slim and elegant, her hands clasped loosely in her lap. She was watching the brilliant scene with a certain air of detachment, as if thinking of other things. Her usual lightness and gay banter seemed for the moment to have deserted her, leaving a soft brooding wistfulness that was strangely appealing.

The Count looked at her.

"She is very beautiful," he murmured under his breath.

Something in his voice caught Lady Dinsmore's attention. She eyed him keenly.

The Count met her look frankly.

"Is—is she engaged to her young friend?" he asked quietly. "Believe me, it is not vulgar curiosity which prompts the question. I—I am—interested." His voice was as composed as ever.

Lady Dinsmore averted her gaze hurriedly and thought with lightning rapidity.

"I have not her confidence," she replied at length, in a low tone; "she is a wise young woman and keeps her own counsel." She appeared to hesitate. "She dislikes you," she said. "I am sorry to wound you, but it is no secret."

Count Poltavo nodded. "I know," he said, simply. "Will you be my good friend and tell me why?"

Lady Dinsmore smiled. "I will do better than that," she said kindly. "I will be your very good friend and give you a chance to ask her why. Frank,"—she bent forward and tapped the young man upon the shoulder with her fan,—"will you come over here and tell me what your editor means?"

The Count resigned his seat courteously, and took the vacant place beside the girl. A silence fell between them, which presently the man broke.

"Miss Gray," he began, seriously, "your aunt kindly gave me this opportunity to ask you a question. Have I your permission also?"

The girl arched her eyebrows. Her lip curled ever so slightly.

"A question to which you and my Aunt Patricia could find no answer between you! It must be subtle indeed! How can I hope to succeed?"

He ignored her sarcasm. "Because it concerns yourself."

"Ah!" She drew herself up and regarded him with sparkling eyes. One small foot began to tap the floor ominously. Then she broke into a vexed little laugh.

"I am no match for you with the foils, Count. I admit it freely. I should have learned by this time that you never say what you mean, or mean what you say."

"Forgive me, Miss Gray, if I say that you mistake me utterly. I mean always what I say—most of all to you. But to say all that I mean—to put into speech all that one hopes or dreams—or dares,"—his voice dropped to a whisper—"to turn oneself inside out like an empty pocket to the gaze of the multitude—that is—imbecile." He threw out his hands with an expressive gesture.

"But to speak concretely—I have unhappily offended you, Miss Gray. Something I have done, or left undone—or my unfortunate personality does not engage your interest. Is it not true?"

There was no mistaking his sincerity now.

But the girl still held aloof, her blue eyes cool and watchful. For the moment, her face, in its young hardness, bore a curious resemblance to her uncle's.

"Is that your question?" she demanded.

The Count bowed silently.

"Then I will tell you!" She spoke in a low voice surcharged with emotion. "I will give you candour for candour, and make an end of all this make-believe."

"That," he murmured, "is what I most desire."

Doris continued, heedless of the interruption. "It is true that I dislike you. I am glad to be able to tell you as much openly. And yet, perhaps, I should use another word. I dislike your secrecy—something dark and hidden within you—and I fear your influence over my uncle. You have known me less than a fortnight—Mr. Farrington, less than a week—yet you have made what I can only conceive to be impertinent proposals of marriage to me. To-day you were for three hours with my uncle. I can only guess what your business has been."

"You would probably guess wrong," he said coolly.

Farrington, at the other end of the box, shot a swift, suspicious glance across. Poltavo turned to the girl again.

"I want only to be a friend of yours in the day of your need," he said, in a low voice; "believe me, that day is not far distant."

"That is true?" She leaned toward him, a little troubled.

He bowed his head in assent.

"If I could believe you," she faltered. "I need a friend! Oh, if you could know how I have been torn by doubts—beset by fears—oppressions." Her voice quivered. "There is something wrong somewhere—I can't tell you everything—if you would help me—wait. May I test you with a question?"

"A thousand if you like."

"And you will answer—truthfully?" In her eagerness she was like a child.

He smiled. "If I answer at all, be sure it will be truthful."

"Tell me then, is Dr. Fall your friend?"

"He is my dearest enemy," he returned, promptly.

He had only the dimmest notion as to the identity of Dr. Fall, but it seemed that a lie was demanded—Poltavo could lie very easily.

"Or Mr. Gorth?" she asked, and he shook his head.

She drew a deep breath of relief. "And my uncle?" The question was a whisper. She appeared to hang upon his reply.

The Count hesitated. "I do not know," he admitted finally. "If he were not influenced by Dr. Fall, I believe he would be my friend." It was a bow at a venture. He was following the bent of her inclination.

For the first time that evening Doris looked at him with interest.

"May I ask how your uncle came to know Gorth?"

He asked the question with the assurance of one who knew all that was to be known save on this point.

She hesitated awhile.

"I don't quite know. The doctor we have always known. He lives in the country, and we only see him occasionally. He is——" She hesitated and then went on rapidly: "I think he has rather dreadful work. He is in charge of a lunatic."

Poltavo was interested.

"Please go on," he said.

The girl smiled. "I am afraid you are an awful gossip," she rallied, but became more serious. "I don't like him very much, but uncle says that is my prejudice. He is one of those quiet, sure men who say very little and make one feel rather foolish. Don't you know that feeling? It is as though one were dancing the tango in front of the Sphinx."

Poltavo showed his white teeth in a smile.

"I have yet to have that experience," he said.

She nodded.

"One of these days you will meet Dr. Fall and you will know how helpless one can feel in his presence."

A remarkable prophecy which was recalled by Poltavo at a moment when he was powerless to profit by the warning.

"Mr. Gorth?"

Again she hesitated and shrugged her shoulders.

"Well," she said frankly, "he is just a common man. He looks almost like a criminal to my mind. But apparently he has been a loyal servant to uncle for many years."

"Tell me," asked Poltavo, "on what terms is Dr. Fall with your uncle? On terms of equality?"

She nodded.

"Naturally," she said with a look of surprise, "he is a gentleman, and is, I believe, fairly well off."

"And Gorth?" asked Poltavo.

He was interested for many reasons as one who had to take the place of that silent figure which lay in the fog-shrouded house.

"I hardly know how to describe uncle's relations with Gorth," she answered, a little puzzled. "There was a time when they were on terms of perfect equality, but sometimes uncle would be very angry with him indeed. He was rather a horrid man really. Do you know a paper called *Gossip's Corner*?" she asked suddenly.

Poltavo had heard of the journal and had found a certain malicious joy in reading its scandalous paragraphs.

"Well," she said in answer to his nod, "that was Mr. Gorth's idea of literature. Uncle would never have the paper in his house, but whenever you saw Mr. Gorth—he invariably waited for uncle in the kitchen—you would be sure to find him chuckling over some of the horrid things which that paper published. Uncle used to get more angry about this than anything else, Mr. Gorth took a delight in all the unpleasant things which this wretched little paper printed. I have heard it said that he had something to do with its publication; but when I spoke to uncle about it, he was rather cross with me for thinking such a thing."

Poltavo was conscious that the eyes of Farrington were searching his face narrowly, and out of the corner of his eye he noted the obvious disapproval. He turned round carelessly.

"An admirable sight—a London theatre crowd."

"Very," said the millionaire, drily.

"Celebrities on every hand—Montague Fallock, for instance, is here."

Farrington nodded.

"And that wise-looking young man in the very end seat of the fourth row—he is in the shadow, but you may see him."

"T. B. Smith," said Farrington, shortly. "I have seen him—I have seen everybody but——"

"But——?"

"The occupant of the royal box. She keeps in the shadow all the time. She is not a detective, too, I suppose?" he asked, sarcastically. He looked round. Frank Doughton, his niece and Lady Dinsmore were engrossed in conversation.

"Poltavo," he said, dropping his voice, "I want to know who that woman is in the opposite box—I have a reason."

The orchestra was playing a soft intermezzo, and of a sudden the lights went down in the house, hushed to silence as the curtain went slowly up upon the second act.

There was a shifting of chairs to distribute the view, a tense moment of silence as the chorus came down a rocky defile and then—a white pencil of flame shot out from the royal box and a sharp crash of a pistol report.

"My God!" gasped Mr. Farrington, and staggered back.

There was a loud babble of voices, a stentorian voice from the back of the stalls shouted, "House lights—quick!" The curtain fell as the house was bathed in the sudden glare of lights.

T. B. saw the flash and leapt for the side aisle: two steps and he was at the door which led to the royal box. It was empty. He passed quickly through the retiring room—empty also, but the private entrance giving on to the street was open and the fog was drifting through in great wreaths.

He stepped out into the street and blew a shrill whistle. Instantly from the gloom came a plain clothes policeman—No, he had seen nobody pass. T. B. went back to the theatre, raced round to the box opposite and found it in confusion.

"Where is Mr. Farrington?" he asked, quickly.

He addressed his remark to Poltavo.

"He is gone," said the other, with a shrug.

"He was here when the pistol was fired—at this box, my friend, as the bullet will testify." He pointed to the mark on the enamelled panel behind. "When the lights came he had gone—that is all."

"He can't have gone," said T. B. shortly. "The theatre is surrounded. I have a warrant for his arrest."

A cry from the girl stopped him. She was white and shaking.

"Arrest!" she gasped, "on what charge?"

"On a charge of being concerned with one Gorth in burglary at the Docks—and with an attempted murder."

"Gorth!" cried the girl, vehemently. "If any man is guilty, it is Gorth—that evil man——"

"Speak softly of the dead," said T. B. gently. "Mr. Gorth, as I have every reason to believe, received wounds from which he died. Perhaps you can enlighten me, Poltavo?"

But the Count could only spread deprecating hands.

T. B. went out into the corridor. There was an emergency exit to the street, but the door was closed. On the floor he found a glove, on the door itself the print of a bloody hand.

But there was no sign of Farrington.

CHAPTER VII

Two days later, at the stroke of ten, Frank Doughton sprang from his taxi in front of the office of the *Evening Times*.

He stood for a moment, drawing in the fresh March air, sweet with the breath of approaching spring. The fog of last night had vanished, leaving no trace. He caught the scent of Southern lilacs from an adjoining florist shop.

He took the stairs three at a time.

"Chief in yet?" he inquired of Jamieson, the news editor, who looked up in astonishment at his entrance, and then at the clock.

"No, he's not down yet. You've broken your record."

Frank nodded.

"I've got to get away early."

Tossing his hat upon his desk, he sat down and went methodically through his papers. He unfolded his *Times*, his mind intent upon the problem of the missing millionaire. He had not seen Doris since that night in the box. The first paper under his hand was an early edition of a rival evening journal.

He glanced down at the headlines on the front page, then with a horrified cry he sprang to his feet He was pale, and the hand which gripped the paper shook.

"Good Lord!" he exclaimed.

Jamieson swung round in his swivel chair.

"What's up?" he inquired.

"Farrington!" said Frank, huskily. "Farrington has committed suicide!"

"Yes, we've a column about it," remarked Jamieson, complacently. "A pretty good story." Then suddenly: "You knew him?" he asked.

Frank Doughton lifted a face from which every vestige of colour had been drained. "I—I was with him at the theatre on the night he disappeared," he said.

Jamieson whistled softly.

Doughton rose hurriedly and reached for his hat.

"I must go to them. Perhaps something can be done. Doris——" he broke off, unable to continue, and turned away sharply.

Jamieson looked at him sympathetically.

"Why don't you go round to Brakely Square?" he suggested. "There may be new developments—possibly a mistake. You note that the body has not been discovered."

Out upon the pavement, Frank caught a passing taxi.

He drove first to the city offices which were Farrington's headquarters. A short talk with the chief clerk was more than enlightening. A brief note in the handwriting of the millionaire announced his intention, "tired of the world," to depart therefrom.

"But why?" asked the young man, in bewilderment.

"Mr. Doughton, you don't seem to quite realize the importance of this tragedy," said the chief clerk, quietly. "Mr. Farrington was a financial king—a multi-millionaire. Or at least, he was so considered up till this morning. We have examined his private books, and it now appears that he had speculated heavily during the last few weeks—he has lost everything, every penny of his own and his ward's fortune. Last night, in a fit of despair, he ended his life. Even his chief clerk had no knowledge of his transactions."

Doughton looked at him in a kind of stupefaction. Was it of Farrington the man was talking such drivel? Farrington, who only the week before had told him in high gratification that within the last month he had added a

cool million to his ward's marriage portion. Farrington, who had, but two days ago, hinted mysteriously of a gigantic financial coup in the near future. And now all that fortune was lost, and the loser was lying at the bottom of the Thames!

"I think I must be going mad," he muttered. "Mr. Farrington wasn't the kind to kill himself."

"It is not as yet known to the public, but I think I may tell you, since you were a friend of Farrington's, that Mr. T. B. Smith has been given charge of the matter. He will probably wish to know your address. And in the meantime, if you run across anything——"

"Certainly! I will let you know. Smith is an able man, of course." Doughton gave the number of his chambers, and retreated hastily, glad that the man had questioned him no further.

He found his cab and flung himself wearily against the cushions. And now for Doris!

But Doris was not visible. Lady Dinsmore met him in the morning room, her usually serene countenance full of trouble. He took her hand in silence.

"It is good of you, my dear Frank, to come so quickly. You have heard all?"

He nodded.

"How is Doris?"

She sank into a chair and shook her head.

"The child is taking it terribly hard! Quite tearless, but with a face like frozen marble! She refused to believe the news, until she saw his own writing. Then she fainted."

Lady Dinsmore took out her lace handkerchief and wiped her eyes.

"Doris," she continued, in a moment, "has sent for Count Poltavo."

Frank stared at her.

"Why?" he demanded.

Lady Dinsmore shook her head.

"I cannot say, definitely," she replied, with a sigh. "She is a silent girl. But I fancy she feels that the Count knows something—she believes that Gregory met with foul play."

Frank leaned forward.

"My own idea!" he said, quietly.

Lady Dinsmore surveyed him with faint, good-humoured scorn.

"You do not know Gregory," she said, after a pause.

"But—I do not follow you! If it was not murder it must have been suicide. But why should Mr. Farrington kill himself?"

"I am sure that he had not the slightest idea of doing anything so unselfish," returned Lady Dinsmore, composedly.

"Then what——"

"Why are you so absolutely sure that he *is* dead?" she asked softly.

Frank stared at her in blank amazement.

"What do you mean?" he gasped. Was she mad also?

"Simply that he is no more dead than you or I," she retorted, coolly. "What evidence have we? A letter, in his own handwriting, telling us gravely that he has decided to die! Does it sound probable? It is a safe presumption that that is the farthest thing from his intentions. For when did Gregory ever tell the truth concerning his movements? No, depend upon it, he is not dead. For purposes of his own, he is pretending to be. He has decided to exist—surreptitiously."

"Why should he?" asked the bewildered young man. This was the maddest theory of all. His head swam with a riot of conflicting impressions. He seemed to have been hurled headlong into a frightful nightmare, and he longed to emerge again into the light of the prosaic, everyday world.

The door at the farther end of the room opened. He looked up eagerly, half expecting to see Farrington himself, smiling upon the threshold.

It was Doris. She stood there for a moment, uncertain, gazing at them rather strangely. In her white morning dress, slightly crumpled, and her dark hair arranged in smooth bandeaux, she was amazingly like a child. The somewhat cold spring sunlight which streamed through the window showed that the event of the night had already set its mark upon her. There were faint violet shadows beneath her eyes, and her face was pale.

Frank came forward hastily, everything blotted from his mind but the sight of her white, grief-stricken face. He took both her hands in his warm clasp.

The girl gave him a long, searching scrutiny, then her lips quivered, and with a smothered sob she flung herself into his arms and hid her face on his shoulder.

Frank held her tenderly. "Don't," he whispered unsteadily—"don't cry, dear."

In her sorrow, she was inexpressibly sweet and precious to him.

He bent down and smoothed with gentle fingers the soft, dusky hair. The fragrance of it filled his nostrils. Its softness sent a delicious ecstasy thrilling from his finger-tips up his arm. All his life he would remember this one moment. He gazed down at her tenderly, a wonderful light in his young face.

"Dear!" he whispered again.

She lifted a pallid face to him. Her violet eyes were misty, and tiny drops of dew were still tangled in her lashes.

"You—you are good to me," she murmured.

At his answering look, a faint colour swept into her cheeks. She gently disengaged herself and sat down.

Lady Dinsmore came forward, and seating herself beside the girl upon the divan, drew her close within the shelter of her arms.

"Now, Frank," she said, cheerily, indicating a chair opposite, "sit down, and let us take counsel together. And first of all,"—she pressed the girl's cold hand—"let me speak my strongest conviction. Gregory is not dead. Something tells me that he is safe and well."

Doris turned her eyes to the young man wistfully. "You have heard something—later?" she asked.

He shook his head. "There has been no time for fresh developments yet. Scotland Yard is in charge of the affair, and T. B. Smith has been put upon the case."

She shuddered and covered her face with her hands.

"He said he was going to arrest him—how strange and ghastly it all is!" she whispered. "I—I cannot get it out of my head. The dark river—my poor uncle—I can see him there—" She broke off.

Lady Dinsmore looked helplessly across to the young man.

It was at that moment that a servant brought a letter.

Lady Dinsmore arched her eyebrows significantly. "Poltavo!" she murmured.

Doris darted forward and took the letter from the salver. She broke the seal and tore out the contents, and seemed to comprehend the message at a glance. A little cry of joy escaped her. Her face, which had been pale, flushed a rosy hue. She bent to read it again, her lips parted. Her whole aspect breathed hope and assurance. She folded the note, slipped it into her bosom, and, without a word, walked from the room.

Frank stared after her, white to the lips with rage and wounded love.

Lady Dinsmore rose briskly to her feet.

"Excuse me. Wait here!" she said, and rustled after her niece.

Frank Doughton paced up and down the room distractedly, momentarily expecting her reappearance. Only a short half-hour ago, with Doris' head upon his breast, he had felt supremely happy; now he was plunged into an

abyss of utter wretchedness. What were the contents of that brief note which had affected her so powerfully? Why should she secrete it with such care unless it conveyed a lover's assurance? His foot came into contact with a chair, and he swore under his breath.

The servant, who had entered unobserved, coughed deprecatingly.

"Her ladyship sends her excuses, sir," he said, "and says she will write you later."

He ushered the young man to the outer door.

Upon the top step Frank halted stiffly. He found himself face to face with Poltavo.

The Count greeted him gravely.

"A sad business!" he murmured. "You have seen the ladies? How does Miss Gray bear it? She is well?"

Frank gazed at him darkly.

"Your note recovered her!" he said, quietly.

"Mine!" Surprise was in the Count's voice. "But I have not written. I am come in person."

Frank's face expressed scornful incredulity. He lifted his hat grimly and descended the steps, and came into collision with a smiling, brown-faced man.

"Mr. Smith!" he said, eagerly, "is there any news?"

T. B. looked at him curiously.

"The Thames police have picked up the body of a man bearing upon his person most of Mr. Farrington's private belongings."

"Then it is true! It is suicide?"

T. B. looked past him.

"If a man cut his own head off before jumping into the river, it was suicide," he said carefully, "for the body is headless. As for myself, I have never witnessed such a phenomenon, and I am sceptical."

A train drew into the arrival platform at Waterloo and a tall man alighted. Nearer at hand he did not appear to be so young as the first impression suggested. For there was a powdering of grey at each temple and certain definite lines about his mouth.

His face was tanned brown, and it required no great powers of observation and deduction to appreciate the fact that he had recently returned to England after residence in a hot climate.

He stood on the edge of the curb outside the new entrance of the station, hesitating whether he should take his chance of finding a cab or whether he should pick up one in the street, for the night was wet and cold and his train had been full.

Whilst he stood a big taxi came noiselessly to the curb and the driver touched his cap.

"Thank you," said the man with a smile. "You can drive me to the Metropole."

He swung the door open and his foot was on the step when a hand touched him lightly, and he turned to meet the scrutiny of a pair of humorous grey eyes.

"I think you had better take another cab, Dr. Goldworthy," said the stranger.

"I am afraid——" began the doctor.

The driver of the car, after a swift glance at the new-comer, would have driven off, but an unmistakable detective-officer had jumped on to the step by his side.

"I am sorry," said T. B. Smith, for he it was who had detained the young doctor, "but I will explain. Don't bother about the taxi driver; my men will see after him. You have had a narrow escape of being kidnapped," he added.

He drove the puzzled doctor to Scotland Yard, and piece by piece he extracted the story of one George Doughton who had died in his arms, of a certain box containing papers which the doctor had promised to deliver to Lady Constance, and of how that lady learnt the news of her sometime lover's death.

"Thank you," said T. B. when the other had finished. "I think I understand."

CHAPTER VIII

It was the morning after the recovery of Farrington's body that T. B. Smith sat in his big study overlooking Brakely Square. He had finished his frugal breakfast, the tray had been taken away, and he was busy at his desk when his man-servant announced Lady Constance Dex. T. B. looked at the card with an expressionless face.

"Show the lady up, George," he said, and rose to meet his visitor as she came sweeping through the doorway.

A very beautiful woman was his first impression. Whatever hardness there was in the face, whatever suggestion there might be of those masterful qualities about which he had heard, there could be no questioning the rare clearness of the skin, the glories of those hazel eyes, or the exquisite modelling of the face. He judged her to be on the right side of thirty, and was not far out, for Lady Constance Dex at that time was twenty-seven.

She was well, even richly, dressed, but she did not at first give this impression. T. B. imagined that she might be an authority on dress, and in this he took an accurate view, for though not exactly a leader of fashion, Lady Constance had perfect taste in such matters.

He pulled forward a chair to the side of his desk.

"Won't you sit down?" he said.

She gave a brief smile as she seated herself.

"I am afraid you will think I am a bore, disturbing you, Mr. Smith, especially at this hour of the morning, but I wanted to see you about the extraordinary happenings of the past few days. I have just come up to town," she went on; "in fact, I came up the moment I heard the news."

"Mr. Farrington is, or was, a friend of yours?" said T. B.

She nodded.

"He and I have been good friends for many years," she replied, quietly; "he is an extraordinary man with extraordinary qualities."

"By the way," said T. B., "his niece was staying with you a few nights ago, was she not?"

Lady Constance Dex inclined her head.

"She came to a ball I was giving, and stayed the night," she said. "I motored back to Great Bradley after the dance, so that I have not seen her since I bade her good night. I am going along to see what I can do for her," she concluded. She had been speaking very deliberately and calmly, but now it was with an effort that she controlled her voice.

"I understand, Mr. Smith," she said suddenly, "that you have a small scent bottle which is my property; Mr. Farrington wrote to me about it."

T. B. nodded.

"It was found in the area of Mr. Farrington's house," he said, "on the night that the two men were killed in Brakely Square."

"What do you suggest?" she asked.

"I suggest that you were at Mr. Farrington's house that night," said T. B. bluntly. "We are speaking now, Lady Constance, as frankly as it is possible for man and woman to speak. I suggest that you were in the house at the time of the shooting, and that when you heard the shots you doubled back into the house, through the kitchen, and out again by a back way."

He saw her lips press tighter together, and went on carelessly:

"You see, I was not satisfied with the examination I made that night. I came again in the early hours of the morning, when the fog had risen a little, and there was evidence of your retirement plainly to be seen. The back of the house opens into Brakely Mews, and I find there are four motor-cars located in the various garages in that interesting thoroughfare, none of which correspond with the tire tracks which I was able to pick up. My theory is that you heard the altercation before the house, that you came out to listen, not to make your escape, and that when you had satisfied

yourself you hurried back to the mews, got into the car which was waiting for you, and drove off through the fog."

"You are quite a real detective," she drawled. "Can you tell me anything more?"

"Save that you drove yourself and that the car was a two-seater, with a self-starting arrangement, I can tell you nothing." She laughed.

"I am afraid you have been all the way to Great Bradley making inquiries," she mocked him. "Everybody there knows I drive a car, and everybody who takes the trouble to find out will learn that it is such a car as you describe."

"But I have not taken that trouble," said T. B. with a smile. "I am curious to know, Lady Constance, what you were doing in the house at that time. I do not for one moment suspect that you shot these men; indeed, I have plenty of evidence that the shots were fired from some other place than the area."

"Suppose I say," she countered, "that I was giving a party that night, that I did not leave my house."

"If you said that," he interrupted, "you would be contradicting something you have already said; namely, that you did leave the house, a journey in the middle of the night as far as I can gather, and evidently one which was of considerable moment."

She looked past him out of the window, her face set, her brows knit in a thoughtful frown.

"I can tell you a lot of things that possibly you do not know," she said, turning to him suddenly. "I can explain my return to Great Bradley very simply. There is a friend of mine, or rather a friend of my friend," she corrected herself, "who has recently returned from West Africa. I received news that he had gone to Great Bradley to carry a message from some one who was very dear to me."

There was a little tremor in her voice, and, perfect actress as she might be, thought T. B., there was little doubt that here she was speaking the truth.

"It was necessary for me that I should not miss this visitor," said Lady Constance, quietly, "though I do not wish to make capital out of that happening."

"I must again interrupt you," said T. B. easily. "The person you are referring to was Dr. Thomas Goldworthy, who has recently returned from an expedition organized by the London School of Tropical Medicine, in Congoland; but your story does not quite tally with the known fact that Dr. Goldworthy arrived in Great Bradley the night before your party, and you interviewed him then. He brought with him a wooden box which he had collected at the Custom House store at the East India Docks. An attempt was made by two burglars to obtain possession of that box and its contents, a fact that interested me considerably, since a friend of mine is engaged upon that somewhat mysterious case of attempted burglary. But that is confusing the issue. These are the facts." He tapped the table slowly as he enumerated them. "Dr. Goldworthy brought this box to Great Bradley, telegraphed to you that he was coming, and you interviewed him. It was subsequent to the interview that you returned to London for your party. Really, Lady Constance, your memory is rather bad."

She faced him suddenly resolute, defiant.

"What are you going to do?" she asked. "You do not accuse me of the murder of your two friends; you cannot even accuse me of the attempt on Mr. Farrington. You know so much of my history," she went on, speaking rapidly, "that you may as well know more. Years ago, Mr. Smith, I was engaged to a man, and we were passionately fond of one another. His name was George Doughton."

"The explorer," nodded T. B.

"He went abroad," she continued, "suddenly and unexpectedly, breaking off our engagement for no reason that I could ascertain, and all my letters to him, all my telegrams, and every effort I made to get in touch with him during the time he was in Africa were without avail. For four years I had no communication from him, no explanation of his extraordinary behaviour, and then suddenly I received news of his death. At first it was thought he had died as a result of fever, but Dr. Goldworthy who came to

see me convinced me that George Doughton was poisoned by somebody who was interested in his death."

Her voice trembled, but with an effort she recovered herself.

"All these years I have not forgotten him, his face has never left my mind, he has been as precious to me as though he were by my side in the flesh. Love dies very hard in women of my age, Mr. Smith," she said, "and love injured and outraged as mine has been developed all the tiger passion which women can nurture. I have learnt for the first time why George Doughton went out to his death. He used to tell me," she said, as she rose from her chair, and paced the room slowly, "that when you are shooting wild beasts you should always shoot the female of the species first, because if she is left to the last she will avenge her slaughtered mate. There is a terrible time coming for somebody," she said, speaking deliberately.

"For whom?" asked T. B.

She smiled.

"I think you know too much already, Mr. Smith," she said; "you must find out all the rest in your own inimitable way; so far as I am concerned, you must leave me to work out my plan of vengeance. That sounds horribly melodramatic, but I am just as horribly in earnest, as you shall learn. They took George Doughton from me and they murdered him; the man who did this was Montague Fallock, and I am perhaps the only person in the world who has met Montague Fallock in life and have known him to be what he is."

She would say no more, and T. B. was too cautious a man to force the pace at this particular moment. He saw her to the door, where her beautiful limousine was awaiting her.

"I hope to meet you again very soon, Lady Constance."

"Without a warrant?" she smiled.

"I do not think it will be with a warrant," he said, quietly, "unless it is for your friend Fallock."

He stood in the hall and watched the car disappear swiftly round the corner of the square. Scarcely was it out of sight than from the little thoroughfare which leads from the mews at the back of the houses shot a motor-cyclist who followed in the same direction as the car had taken.

T. B. nodded approvingly; he was leaving nothing to chance. Lady Constance Dex would not be left day or night free from observation.

"And she did not mention Farrington!" he said to himself, as he mounted the stairs. "One would almost think he was alive."

It was nine o'clock that evening when the little two-seated motor-car which Lady Constance drove so deftly came spinning along the broad road which runs into Great Bradley, skirted the town by a side road and gained the great rambling rectory which stood apart from the little town in its own beautiful grounds. She sprang lightly out of the car.

The noise of the wheels upon the gravel walk had brought a servant to the door, and she brushed past the serving man without a word; ran upstairs to her own room and closed and locked the door behind her before she switched on the electric light. The electric light was an unusual possession in so small a town, but she owed its presence in the house to her friendship with that extraordinary man who was the occupant of the Secret House.

Three miles away, out of sight of the rectory in a fold of the hill was this great gaunt building, erected, so popular gossip said, by one who had been crossed in love and desired to live the life of a recluse, a desire which was respected by the superstitious town-folk of Great Bradley. The Secret House had been built in the hollow which was known locally as "Murderers' Valley," a pretty little glen which many years before had been the scene of an outrageous crime. The house added to, rather than detracted from, the reputation of the glen; no man saw the occupant of the Secret House; his secretary and his two Italian servants came frequently to Great Bradley to make their purchases; now and again his closed car would whizz through the streets; and Great Bradley, speculating as to the identity of its owner, could do no more than hope that one of these fine days a wheel would come off that closed car and its occupant be forced to disclose himself.

But in the main the town was content to allow the eccentric owner of the Secret House all the privacy he desired. He might do things which were unheard of, as indeed he did, and Great Bradley, standing aloof, was content to thank God that it was not cast in the same bizarre mould as this wealthy unknown, and took comfort from the reflection.

For he did many curious things. He had a power house of his own; you could see the chimney showing over Wadleigh Copse, with dynamos of enormous power which generated all that was necessary for lighting and heating the big house.

There were honest British working men in Great Bradley who spoke bitterly of the owner's preference for foreign labour, and it was a fact that the men engaged in the electrical works were without exception of foreign origin. They had their quarters and lived peacefully apart, neither offering nor desiring the confidence of their fellow-townsmen. They were, in fact, frugal people of the Latin race who had no other wish than to work hard and to save as much of their salaries as was possible in order that at some future date they might return to their beloved Italy, and live in peace with the world; they were well paid for their discretion, a sufficient reason for its continuance.

Lady Constance Dex had been fortunate in that she had secured one of the few favours which the Secret House had shown to the town. An underground cable had been laid to her house, and she alone of all human beings in the world was privileged to enter the home of this mysterious stranger without challenge.

She busied herself for some time changing her dress and removing the signs of her hasty journey from London. Her maid brought her dinner on a tray, and when she had finished she went again into her boudoir, and opening the drawer of her bureau she took out a slender-barrelled revolver. She looked at it for some time, carefully examined the chambers and into each dropped a nickel-tipped cartridge. She snapped back the hinged chamber and slipped the pistol into a pocket of her woollen cloak. She locked the bureau again and went out through the door and down the stairs. Her car was still waiting, but she turned to the servant who stood deferentially by the door.

"Have the car put in the garage," she said; "I am going to see Mrs. Jackson."

"Very good, my lady," said the man.

CHAPTER IX

T. B. Smith came down to Great Bradley with only one object in view. He knew that the solution to the mystery, not only of Farrington's disappearance, but possibly the identity of the mysterious Mr. Fallock, was to be found rather in this small town than in the metropolis. Scotland Yard was on its mettle. Within a space of seven days there had been two murders, a mysterious shooting, and a suicide so full of extraordinary features as to suggest foul play, without the police being in the position to offer a curious and indignant public the slightest resemblance of a clue. This, following as it had upon a shooting affray at the Docks, had brought Scotland Yard to a position of defence.

"There are some rotten things being said about us," said the Chief Commissioner on the morning of T. B.'s departure. He threw a paper across the table, and T. B. picked it up with an enigmatic smile. He read the flaring column in which the intelligence of the police department was called into question, without a word, and handed the paper back to his chief.

"I think we might solve all these mysteries in one swoop," he said. "I am going down to-day to inspect the Secret House—that is where one end of the solution lies."

The Chief Commissioner looked interested.

"It is very curious that you should be talking about that," he said. "I have had a report this morning from the chief constable of the county on that extraordinary menage."

"And what has he to say about it?"

Sir Gordon Billings shrugged his shoulders.

"It is one of those vague reports which chief constables are in the habit of furnishing," he said, drily. "Apparently the owner is an American, an

invalid, and is eccentric. More than this—and this will surprise you—he has been certified by competent medical authorities as being insane."

"Insane?" T. B. repeated in surprise.

"Insane," nodded the chief; "and he has all the privileges which the Lunacy Act confers upon a man. That is rather a facer."

T. B. looked thoughtful.

"I had a dim idea that I might possibly discover in the occupant one who was, at any rate, a close relative to Fallock."

"You are doomed to disappointment," smiled the chief; "there is no doubt about that. I have had all the papers up. The man was certified insane by two eminent specialists, and is under the care of a doctor who lives on the premises, and who also acts as secretary to this Mr. Moole. The secret of the Secret House is pretty clear; it is a private lunatic asylum,—that, and nothing else."

T. B. thought for a while.

"At any rate no harm can be done by interviewing this cloistered Mr. Moole, or by inspecting the house," he said.

He arrived in Great Bradley in the early part of the afternoon, and drove straight away to the Secret House. The flyman put him down at some distance from the big entrance gate, and he made a careful and cautious reconnaissance of the vicinity. The house was a notable one. It made no pretence at architectural beauty, standing back from the road, and in the very centre of a fairly uncultivated patch of ground. All that afternoon he measured and observed the peculiarities of the approach, the lie of the ground, the entrances, and the exits, and had obtained too a cautious and careful observation of the great electrical power house, which stood in a clump of trees about a hundred yards from the house itself.

The next morning he paid a more open visit. This time his fly put him down at the gateway of the house, and he moved slowly up the gravel pathway to the big front entrance door. He glanced at the tip of the power house chimney which showed over the trees, and shook his head in some

doubt. He had furtively inspected the enormous plant which the eccentric owner of the Secret House had found it necessary to lay down.

"Big enough to run an electric railway," was his mental comment. He had seen, too, the one-eyed engineer, a saturnine man with a disfiguring scar down one side of his face, and a trick of showing his teeth on one side of his mouth when he smiled.

T. B. would have pursued his investigations further, but suddenly he had felt something click under his feet, as he stood peering in at the window, and instantly a gong had clanged, and a shutter dropped noiselessly behind the window, cutting off all further view.

T. B. had retired hastily and had cleared the gates just before they swung to, obviously operated by somebody in the power house.

His present visit was less furtive and it was in broad daylight, with two detectives ostentatiously posted at the gates, that he made his call—for he took no unnecessary risks.

He walked up the four broad marble steps to the portico of the house, and wiped his feet upon a curious metal mat as he pressed the bell. The door itself was half hidden by a hanging curtain, such as one may see screening the halls of suburban houses, made up of brightly coloured beads or lengths of bamboo. In this case it was made by suspending thousands of steel beads upon fine wire strings from a rod above the door. It gave the impression that the entrance itself was of steel, but when in answer to his summons the door was opened, the *chick* looped itself up on either side in the manner of a stage curtain, and it seemed to work automatically on the opening of the door.

There stood in the entrance a tall man, with a broad white face and expressionless eyes. He was dressed soberly in black, and had the restrained and deferential attitude of the superior man-servant.

"I am Mr. Smith, of Scotland Yard," said T. B. briefly, "and I wish to see Mr. Moole."

The man in black looked dubious.

"Will you come in?" he asked, and T. B. was shown into a large comfortably furnished sitting-room.

"I am afraid you can't see Mr. Moole," said the man, as he closed the door behind him; "he is, as you probably know, a partial invalid, but if there is anything I can do——"

"You can take me to Mr. Moole," said T. B. with a smile; "short of that—nothing."

The man hesitated.

"If you insist," he began.

The detective nodded.

"I am his secretary and his doctor—Doctor Fall," the other introduced himself, "and it may mean trouble for me—perhaps you will tell me your business?"

"My business is with Mr. Moole."

The doctor bowed.

"Come this way," he said, and he led the detective across the broad hall. He opened a plain door, and disclosed a small lift, standing aside for the other to enter.

"After you," said T. B. politely.

Dr. Fall smiled and entered, and T. B. Smith followed.

The lift shot swiftly upward and came to a rest at the third floor.

It was not unlike an hotel, thought T. B., in the general arrangement of the place.

Two carpeted corridors ran left and right, and the wall before him was punctured with doorways at regular intervals. His guide led him to the left, to the end of the passage, and opened the big rosewood door which faced him. Inside was another door. This he opened, and entered a big apartment and T. B. followed. The room contained scarcely any furniture. The

panelling on the walls was of polished myrtle; a square of deep blue carpet of heavy pile was set exactly in the centre, and upon this stood a silver bedstead. But it was not the furnishing or the rich little gilt table by the bedside or the hanging electrolier which attracted T. B.'s attention; rather his eyes fell instantly upon the man on the bed.

A man with an odd yellow face, who, with his steady unwinking eyes might have been a figure of wax save for the regular rise and fall of his breast, and the spasmodic twitching of his lips. T. B. judged him to be somewhere in the neighbourhood of seventy, and, if anything, older. His face was without expression; his eyes, which turned upon the intruder, were bright and beady.

"This is Mr. Moole," said the suave secretary. "I am afraid if you talk to him you will get little in the way of information."

T. B. stepped to the side of the bed and looked down. He nodded his head in greeting, but the other made no response.

"How are you, Mr. Moole?" said T. B. gently. "I have come down from London to see you."

There was still no response from the shrunken figure under the bedclothes.

"What is your name?" asked T. B. after a while.

For an instant a gleam of intelligence came to the eyes of the wreck. His mouth opened tremulously and a husky voice answered him.

"Jim Moole," it croaked, "poor old Jim Moole; ain't done nobody harm."

Then his eyes turned fearfully to the man at T. B.'s side; the old lips came tightly together and no further encouragement from T. B. could make him speak again.

A little later T. B. was ushered out of the room.

"You agree with me," said the doctor smoothly, "Mr. Moole is not in a position to carry on a very long conversation."

T. B. nodded.

"I quite agree," he said, pleasantly. "An American millionaire—Mr. Moole—is he not?"

Dr. Fall inclined his head. His black eyes never left T. B.'s face.

"An American millionaire," he repeated.

"He does not talk like an American," said T. B.; "even making allowances that one must for his mental condition, there is no inducement to accept the phenomenon."

"Which phenomenon?" asked the other, quickly.

"That which causes an American millionaire, a man probably of some refinement and education, at any rate of some lingual characteristics, to talk like a Somerset farm labourer."

"What do you mean?" asked the other harshly.

"Just what I say," said T. B. Smith; "he has the burr of a man who has been brought up in Somerset. He is obviously one who has had very little education. My impression of him does not coincide with your description."

"I think, Mr. Smith," said the other, quietly, "that you have had very little acquaintance with people who are mentally deficient, otherwise you would know that those unfortunate fellow-creatures of ours who are so afflicted are very frequently as unrecognizable from their speech as from their actions."

He led the way to the lift door, but T. B. declined its service.

"I would rather walk down," he said.

He wanted to be better acquainted with this house, to have a larger knowledge of its topography than the ascent and descent by means of an electric lift would allow him. Dr. Fall offered no objection, and led the way down the red carpeted stairs.

"I am well acquainted with people of unsound mind," T. B. went on, "especially that section of the insane whose lunacy takes the form of dropping their aitches."

"You are being sarcastic at my expense," said the other, suddenly turning to him with a lowered brow. "I think it is only right to tell you that, in addition to being Mr. Moole's secretary, I am a doctor."

"That is also no news to me," smiled T. B. "You are an American doctor with a Pennsylvania degree. You came to England in eighteen hundred and ninety-six, on board the *Lucania*. You left New York hurriedly as the result of some scandal in which you were involved. It is, in fact, much easier to trace your movements since the date of your arrival than it is to secure exact information concerning Mr. Moole, who is apparently quite unknown to the American Embassy."

The large face of the secretary flushed to a deep purple.

"You are possibly exceeding your duty," he said, gratingly, "in recalling a happening of which I was but an innocent victim."

"Possibly I am," agreed T. B.

He bowed slightly to the man, and descended the broad steps to the unkempt lawn in front of the house. He was joined at the gate by the two men he had brought down. One of these was Ela.

"What did you find?" asked that worthy man.

"I found much that will probably be useful to us in the future," said T. B., as he stepped into the fly, followed by his subordinate.

He turned to the third detective.

"You had better wait here," he said, "and report on who arrives and who departs. I shall be back within a couple of hours."

The man saluted, and the fly drove off.

"I have one more call to make," said T. B. Smith, "and I had better make that alone, I think. Tell the flyman to drop me at Little Bradley Rectory."

Lady Constance Dex was not unprepared for the visit of the detective. She had seen him from the window of her room, driving past the rectory in the

direction of the Secret House, and he found her expectantly waiting him in the drawing-room.

He came straight to the heart of the matter.

"I have just been to visit a man who I understand is a friend of yours," he said.

She inclined her head.

"You mean Mr. Moole?"

"That is the man," said the cheerful T. B.

She thought for a long time before she spoke again. She was evidently making up her mind as to how much she would tell this insistent officer of the law.

"I suppose you might as well know the whole facts of the case," she said; "if you will sit over there, I will supplement the information I gave you in Brakely Square a few days ago."

T. B. seated himself.

"I am certainly a visitor to the Secret House," she said, after a while. She did not look at the detective as she spoke, but kept her gaze fixed upon the window and the garden without.

"I told you that I have had one love affair in my life; that affair," she went on steadily, "was with George Doughton; you probably know his son."

T. B. nodded.

"It was a case of love at first sight. George Doughton was a widower, a good-natured, easy-going, lovable man. He was a brave and brilliant man too, famous as an explorer as you know. I met him first in London; he introduced me to the late Mr. Farrington, who was a friend of his, and when Mr. Farrington came to Great Bradley and took a house here for the summer, George Doughton came down as his guest, and I got to know him better than ever I had known any human being before in my life."

She hesitated again.

"We were lovers," she went on, defiantly,—"why should I not confess to an experience of which I am proud?—and our marriage was to have taken place on the very day he sailed for West Africa. George Doughton was the very soul of honour, a man to whom the breath of scandal was as a desert wind, withering and terrible. He was never in sympathy with the modern spirit of our type, was old-fashioned in some respects, had an immense and beautiful conception of women and their purity, and carried his prejudices against, what we call smart society, to such an extent that, if a man or woman of his set was divorced in circumstances discreditable to themselves, he would cut them out of his life."

Her voice faltered, and she seemed to find difficulty in continuing, but she braced herself to it.

"I had been divorced," she went on, in a low voice; "in my folly I had been guilty of an indiscretion which was sinless as it was foolish. I had married a cold, rigid and remorseless man when I was little more than a child, and I had run away from him with one who was never more to me than a brother. A chivalrous, kindly soul who paid for his chivalry dearly. All the evidence looked black against me, and my husband had no difficulty in securing a divorce. It passed into the oblivion of forgotten things, yet in those tender days when my love for George Doughton grew I lived in terror least a breath of the old scandal should be revived. I had reason for that terror, as I will tell you. I was, as I say, engaged to be married. Two days before the wedding George Doughton left me without a word of explanation. The first news that I received was that he had sailed for Africa; thereafter I never heard from him." She dropped her voice until she was hardly audible.

T. B. preserved a sympathetic silence. It was impossible to doubt the truth of all she was saying, or to question her anguish. Presently she spoke again.

"Mr. Farrington was most kind, and it was he who introduced me to Dr. Fall."

"Why?" asked T. B. quickly.

She shook her head.

"I never understood until quite lately," she said. "At the time I accepted as a fact that Dr. Fall had large interests in West Africa, and would enable me to get into communication with George Doughton. I clutched at straws, so to speak; I became a constant visitor to the Secret House, the only outside visitor that extraordinary domain has ever had within memory. I found that my visits were not without result. I was enabled to trace the movements of my lover; I was enabled, too, to send letters to him in the certainty that they would reach him. I have reason now to know that Mr. Farrington had another object in introducing me; he wanted me kept under the closest observation lest I should get into independent communication with George Doughton. That is all the story so far as my acquaintance with the Secret House is concerned. I have only seen Mr. Moole on one occasion."

"And Farrington?" asked T. B.

She shook her head.

"I have never seen Mr. Farrington in the house," she replied.

"Or Montague Fallock?" he suggested.

She raised her eyebrows.

"I have never seen Montague Fallock," she said slowly, "though I have heard from him. He, too, knew of the scandal; he it was who blackmailed me in the days of my courtship."

"You did not tell me about that," said T. B.

"There is little to tell," she said, with a weary gesture; "it was this mysterious blackmailer who terrified me, and to whose machinations I ascribe George Doughton's discovery, for now I know that he was told of my past, and was told by Montague Fallock. He demanded impossible sums. I gave him as much as I could, almost ruined myself to keep this blackmailer at bay, but all to no purpose."

She rose and paced the room.

"I have not finished with Montague Fallock," she said.

She turned her white face to the detective, and he saw a hard gleam in her eye.

"There is much that I could tell you, Mr. Smith, which would enable you perhaps to bring to justice the most dastardly villain that has ever walked the earth."

"May I suggest," said T. B. gently, "that you place me in possession of those facts?"

She smiled, implying a negative.

"I have my own plans for avenging the murder of my lover and the ruin of my life," she said hardly. "When Montague Fallock dies, I would rather he died by my hand."

CHAPTER X

Count Poltavo, a busy man of affairs in these days, walked up the stairs of the big block of flats in which he had his modest dwelling with a little smile upon his lips and a sense of cheer in his heart. There were many reasons why this broken adventurer, who had arrived in London only a few months before with little more than his magnificent wardrobe, should feel happy. He had been admitted suddenly into the circle of the elect. Introductions had been found which paved a way for further introductions. He was the confidential adviser of the most beautiful woman in London, was the trusted of aristocrats. If there was a wrathful and suspicious young newspaper man obviously and undisguisedly thirsting for his blood that was not a matter which greatly affected the Count. It had been his good fortune to surprise the secret of the late Mr. Farrington; by the merest of chances he had happened upon the true financial position of this alleged millionaire; had discovered him to be a swindler and in league, so he guessed, with the mysterious Montague Fallock. All this fine position which Farrington had built up was a veritable house of cards. It remained now for the Count to discover how far Farrington's affection for his niece had stayed his hand in his predatory raid upon the cash balances of his friends and relatives. Anyway, the Count thought, as he fitted a tiny key into the lock of his flat, he was in a commanding position. He had all the winning cards in his hand, and if the prizes included so delectable a reward as Doris Gray might be, the Count, a sentimental if unscrupulous man, was perfectly satisfied. He walked through his sitting-room to the bedroom beyond and stood for a moment before the long mirror. It was a trick of Count Poltavo to commune with himself, and when he was rallied on this practice, suggestive of vanity to the uninitiated, he confirmed rather than disabused that criticism by protesting that there was none whom he could trust with such absence of fear of consequence as his own bright worthy image.

He had reason for the smile which curved his thin lips. Every day he was making progress which placed Doris Gray more and more, if not in his power, at least under his influence.

He lived alone without any servants save for the old woman who came every morning to tidy his flat, and when the bell rang as he stood before the mirror, he answered it himself without any thought as to the importance of the summons. For Count Poltavo was not above taking in the milk or chaffering with tradesmen over the quality of a cabbage. It was necessary that he must jealously husband his slender resources until fate placed him in possession of a larger and a more generous fortune than that which he now possessed. He opened the door, and took a step back, then with a little bow:

"Come in, Mr. Doughton," he said.

Frank Doughton strode across the tiny hall, waited until the Count had closed the door, and opened another, ushering the visitor into his study.

"To what am I indebted for the honour of this visit?" asked Poltavo, as he pushed forward a chair.

"I wanted to see you on a matter which deeply affects you and me," said the young man briskly, even rudely.

Count Poltavo inclined his head. He recognized all the disagreeable portents, but he was not in any way abashed or afraid. He had had experience of many situations less pleasant than this threatened to be and had played his part worthily.

"I can give you exactly a quarter of an hour," he said, looking at his watch; "at the end of that period I must leave for Brakely Square. You understand there is to be a reading of the will of our departed friend, and——"

"I know all about that," interrupted Frank, roughly; "you are not the only person who has been invited to that pleasant function."

"You also?" The Count was a little surprised. He himself went as friend and adviser to the bereaved girl, a position which a certain letter had secured for him. That letter in three brief lines had told the girl to trust Poltavo. It was about this letter that Frank had come, and he came straight to the point.

"Count Poltavo," he said, "the day after Mr. Farrington's disappearance a messenger brought a letter for Miss Gray."

Poltavo nodded.

"So I understand," he said, smoothly.

"So you know," challenged the other, "because it concerned you. It was a letter in which Doris was told to trust you absolutely; it was a letter also which gave her hope that the man whose body was found in the Thames was not that of Farrington."

Poltavo frowned.

"That is not a view that has been accepted by the authorities," he said quickly. "The jury had no doubt that this was the body of Mr. Farrington, and brought in a verdict accordingly."

Frank nodded.

"What a jury thinks and what Scotland Yard thinks," he said, drily, "are not always in agreement. As a result of that letter," he went on, "Miss Gray has reposed a great deal of trust in you, Count, and day by day my efforts to serve her have been made more difficult by her attitude. I am a plain-speaking Englishman, and I am coming to the point, right now,"—he thumped the table: "Doris Gray's mind is becoming poisoned against one who has no other object in life than to serve her faithfully."

Count Poltavo shrugged his shoulders and smiled.

"My dear young man," he said, smoothly, "you do not come to me, I trust, to act as your agent in order to induce Miss Gray to take any other view of you than she does. Because if you do," he went on suavely, "I am afraid that I cannot help you very much. There is an axiom in the English language to which I subscribe most thoroughly, and it is that 'all is fair in love and war.'"

"In love?" repeated Frank, looking the other straight in the eyes.

"In love," the Count asserted, with a nod of his head, "it is not the privilege of any human being to monopolize in his heart all the love in the world, or

to say this thing I love and none other shall love it. Those qualities in Miss Gray which are so adorable to you are equally adorable to me."

He spread out his hands in deprecation.

"It is a pity," he said, with his little smile, "and I would do anything to avoid an unpleasant outcome to our rivalry. It is a fact that cannot be gainsaid that such a rivalry exists. I have reason to know that the late Mr. Farrington had certain views concerning his niece and ward, and I flatter myself that those views were immensely favourable to me."

"What do you mean?" asked Frank, harshly.

The Count shrugged again.

"I had a little conversation with Mr. Farrington in the course of which he informed me that he would like nothing better than to see the future of Doris assured in my hands."

Frank went white.

"That is a lie," he said, hoarsely. "The views of Mr. Farrington were as well known to me as they are to you—better, if that is your interpretation of them."

"And they were?" asked the Count, curiously.

"I decline to discuss the matter with you," said Frank. "I want only to tell you this. If by chance I discover that you are working against me by your lies or your cunning, I will make you very sorry that you ever came into my life."

"Allow me to show you the door," said Count Poltavo. "People of my race and of my family are not usually threatened with impunity."

"Your race I pretty well know," said Frank, coolly; "your family is a little more obscure. If it is necessary for me to go any farther into the matter, and if I am so curious that I am anxious for information, I shall know where to apply."

"And where will that be?" asked the Count softly, his hand upon the door.

"To the Governor of Alexandrovski Prison," said Frank.

The Count closed the door behind his visitor, and stood for some moments in thought.

It was a depressed little party which assembled an hour later in the drawing-room of the Brakely Square house. To the Count's annoyance, Frank was one of these, and he had contrived to secure a place near the sad-faced girl and engage her in conversation. The Count did not deem it advisable at this particular moment to make any attempt to separate them: he was content to wait.

T. B. Smith was there.

He had secured an invitation by the simple process of informing those responsible for the arrangements that if that courtesy was not offered to him he would come in another capacity than that of a friend.

The senior partner of Messrs. Debenham & Tree, the great city lawyers, was also present, seated at a table with his clerk, on which paper and ink was placed, and where too, under the watchful eyes of his assistant, was a bulky envelope heavily sealed.

There were many people present to whom the reading of this will would be a matter of the greatest moment. Farrington had left no private debts. Whatever plight the shareholders of the company might be in, he himself, so far as his personal fortune was concerned, was certainly solvent.

T. B.'s inquiries had revealed, to his great astonishment, that the girl's fortune was adequately secured. Much of the contents of the will, which was to astonish at least three people that day, was known to T. B. Smith, and he had pursued his investigations to the end of confirming much which the dead millionaire had stated.

Presently, when Doris left the young man to go to the lawyer for a little consultation, T. B. made his way across the room and sat down by the side

of Frank Doughton.

"You were a friend of Mr. Farrington's, were you not?" he asked.

Frank nodded.

"A great friend?"

"I hardly like to say that I was a great friend," said the other; "he was very kind to me."

"In what way was he kind?" asked T. B. "You will forgive me for asking these somewhat brutal questions, but as you know I have every reason to be interested."

Frank smiled faintly.

"I do not think that you are particularly friendly disposed toward him, Mr. Smith," he said; "in fact, I rather wonder that you are present, after what happened at the theatre."

"After my saying that I wanted to arrest him," smiled T. B. "But why not? Even millionaires get mixed up in curious illegal proceedings," he said; "but I am rather curious to know what is the reason for Mr. Farrington's affection and in what way he was kind to you."

Frank hesitated. He desired most of all to be loyal to the man who, with all his faults, had treated him with such kindness.

"Well, for one thing," he said, "he gave me a jolly good commission, a commission which might easily have brought me in a hundred thousand pounds."

T. B.'s interest was awakened.

"What was that?" he asked.

In as few words as possible Frank told the story of the search for the heir to the Tollington millions.

"Of course," he said, with an apologetic smile, "I was not the man for the job—he should have given it to you. I am afraid I am not cut out for a

detective, but he was very keen on my taking the matter in hand."

T. B. bit his lips thoughtfully.

"I know something of the Tollington millions," he said; "they were left by the timber king of America who died without issue, and whose heir or heirs were supposed to be in this country. We have had communications about the matter."

He frowned again as he conjured to his mind all the data of this particular case.

"Of course, Farrington was one of the trustees; he was a friend of old Tollington. That money would not be involved," he said, half to himself, "because the four other trustees are men of integrity holding high positions in the financial world of the United States. Thank you for telling me; I will look up the matter, and if I can be of any assistance to you in carrying out Mr. Farrington's wishes you may be sure that I will."

There was a stir at the other end of the room. With a preliminary cough, the lawyer rose, the papers in his hand.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he said, and a silence fell upon the room, "it is my duty to read to you the terms of the late Mr. Farrington's will, and since it affects a great number of people in this room, I shall be glad if you will retain the deepest silence."

There was a murmur of agreement all round, and the lawyer began reading the preliminary and conventional opening of the legal document. The will began with one or two small bequests to charitable institutions, and the lawyer looking over his glasses said pointedly:

"I need hardly say that there will be no funds available from the estate for carrying out the wishes of the deceased gentleman in this respect, since they are all contingent upon Mr. Farrington possessing a certain sum at his death which I fear he did not possess. The will goes on to say," he continued reading:

"'KNOWING that my dear niece and ward is amply provided for, I can do no more than leave her an expression of my trust and love, and it may be

taken as my last and final request that she marries with the least possible delay the person whom it is my most earnest desire she should take as a husband.'"

Two people in the audience felt a sudden cold thrill of anticipation.

"'That person,'" continued the lawyer, solemnly, "'is my good friend, Frank Doughton.'"

There was a gasp from Frank; a startled exclamation from the girl. Poltavo went red and white and his eyes glowed. T. B. Smith, to whom this portion of the will was known, watched the actors keenly. He saw the bewildered face of the girl, the rage in Poltavo's eyes, and the blank astonishment on the face of Frank as the lawyer went on:

"'Knowing the insecurity of present-day investments, and seized with the fear that the fortune entrusted to my keeping might be dissipated by one of those strange accidents of finance with which we are all acquainted, I have placed the whole of her fortune, to the value of eight hundred thousand pounds, in a safe at the London Safe Deposit, and in the terms of the power vested in me as trustee by her late father I have instructed my lawyers to hand her the key and the authority to open the safe on the day she marries the aforesaid Frank Doughton. And if she should refuse or through any cause or circumstance decline to carry out my wishes in this respect, I direct that the fortune contained therein shall be withheld from her for the space of five years as from the date of my death.'"

There was another long silence. T. B. saw the change come over the face of Poltavo. From rage he had passed to wonder, from wonder to suspicion, and from suspicion to anger again. T. B. would have given something substantial to have known what was going on inside the mind of this smooth adventurer. Again the lawyer's voice insisted upon attention.

"'To Frank Doughton,'" he read, "'I bequeath the sum of a thousand pounds to aid him in his search for the Tollington heir. To T. B. Smith, the assistant commissioner at Scotland Yard with whom I have had some acquaintance, and whose ability I hold in the highest regard, I leave the sum of a thousand pounds as a slight reward for his service to civilization, and I direct that on the day he discovers the most insidious enemy to

society, Montague Fallock, he shall receive a further sum of one thousand pounds from the trustees of my estate.'"

The lawyer looked up from his reading.

"That again, Mr. Smith, is contingent upon certain matters."

T. B. smiled.

"I quite understand that," he said, drily, "though possibly you don't," he added under his breath.

This was a portion of the will about which he knew nothing for the document had been executed but a few days before the tragedy which had deprived the world of Gregory Farrington. There were a few more paragraphs to read; certain jewelleries had been left to his dear friend Count Ernesto Poltavo, and the reading was finished.

"I have only to say now," said the lawyer, as he carefully folded his glasses and put them away in his pocket, "that there is a very considerable sum of money at Mr. Farrington's bank. It will be for the courts to decide in how so far that money is to be applied to the liquidation of debts incurred by the deceased as director of a public company. That is to say, that it will be a question for the supreme judicature whether the private fortune of the late Mr. Farrington will be seized to satisfy his other creditors."

There was a haze and a babble of talk. Poltavo crossed with quick steps to the lawyer, and for a moment they were engaged in quick conversation; then suddenly the adventurer turned and left the room. T. B. had seen the move and followed with rapid steps. He overtook the Count in the open doorway of the house.

"A word with you, Count," he said, and they descended the steps together into the street. "The will was rather a surprise to you?"

Count Poltavo was now all smooth equanimity. You might not have thought from his smooth face and his smile, and his gentle drawling tone, that he had been affected by the reading of this strange document.

"It is a surprise, I confess," he said. "I do not understand my friend Farrington's action in regard to——" he hesitated.

"In regard to Miss Gray," smiled T. B.

Of a sudden the self-control of the man left him, and he turned with a snarling voice on the detective, but his wrath was not directed toward the cool man who stood before him.

"The treacherous dog!" he hissed, "to do this—to me. But it shall not be, it shall not be, I tell you; this woman is more to me than you can imagine." He struck his breast violently. "Can I speak with you privately?"

"I thought you might wish to," said T. B.

He lifted his hand and made an almost imperceptible signal, and a taxicab which had stood on the opposite side of the road, and followed them slowly as they walked along Brakely Square, suddenly developed symptoms of activity, and came whirring across the road to the sidewalk.

T. B. opened the door and Poltavo stepped in, the detective following. There was no need to give any instructions, and without any further order the cab whirled its way through the West End until it came to the arched entrance of Scotland Yard, and there the man alighted. By the time they had reached T. B.'s room, Poltavo had regained something of his self-possession. He walked up and down the room, his hands thrust into his pockets, his head sunk upon his breast.

"Now," said T. B., seating himself at his desk, "what would you like to say?"

"There is much I would like to say," said Poltavo, quietly, "and I am now considering whether it will be in my interest to tell all at this moment or whether it would be best that I should maintain my silence longer."

"Your silence in regard to Farrington I presume you are referring to," suggested T. B. Smith easily; "perhaps I can assist you a little to unburden your mind."

"I think not," said Poltavo, quickly; "you cannot know as much about this man as I. I had intended," he said, frankly, "to tell you much that would have surprised you; at present it is advisable that I should wait for one or two days in order that I may give some interested people an opportunity of

undoing a great deal of mischief which they have done. I must go to Paris at once."

T. B. said nothing; there was no purpose to be served in hastening the issue at this particular moment. The man had recovered his self-possession, he would talk later, and T. B. was content to wait, and for the moment to entertain his unexpected guest.

"It is a strange place," said the Count calmly, scrutinizing the room; "this is Scotland Yard! The Great Scotland Yard! of which all criminals stand in terror, even with which our local criminals in Poland have some acquaintance."

"It is indeed a strange place," said T. B. "Shall I show you the strangest place of all?"

"I should be delighted," said the other.

T. B. led the way along the corridor, rang for the lift, and they were shot up to the third floor. Here at the end of a long passage, was a large room, in which row after row of cabinets were methodically arrayed.

"This is our record department," said T. B.; "it will have a special interest for you, Count Poltavo."

"Why for me?" asked the other, with a smile.

"Because I take it you are interested in the study of criminal detection," replied T. B. easily.

He walked aimlessly along one extensive row of drawers, and suddenly came to a halt.

"Here, for instance, is a record of a remarkable man," he said. He pulled open a drawer unerringly, ran his fingers along the top of a batch of envelopes and selected one. He nodded the Count to a polished table near the window, and pulled up two chairs.

"Sit down," he said, "and I will introduce you to one of the minor masters of the criminal world."

Count Poltavo was an interested man as T. B. opened the envelope and took out two plain folders, and laid them on the table.

He opened the first of these; the photograph of a military-looking man in Russian uniform lay upon the top. Poltavo saw it, gasped, and looked up, his face livid.

"That was the Military Governor of Poland," said T. B., easily; "he was assassinated by one who posed as his son many years ago."

The Count had risen quickly, and stood shaking from head to foot, his trembling hand at his mouth.

"I have never seen him," he muttered. "I think your record office is very close—you have no ventilation."

"Wait a little," said T. B., and he turned to the second dossier.

Presently he extracted another photograph, the photograph of a young man, a singularly good-looking youth, and laid it on the table by the side of the other picture.

"Do you know this gentleman?" asked T. B.

There was no reply.

"It is the photograph of the murderer," the detective went on, "and unfortunately this was not his only crime. You will observe there are two distinct folders, each filled with particulars of our young friend's progress along the path which leads to the gallows."

He sorted out another photograph. It was a beautiful girl in a Russian peasant costume; evidently the portrait of some one taken at a fancy dress ball, because both the refined face and the figure of the girl were inconsistent with the costume.

"That is the Princess Lydia Bontasky," said T. B., "one of the victims of our young friend's treachery. Here is another."

The face of the fourth photograph was plain, and marked with sorrow.

"She was shot at Kieff by our young and high-spirited friend, and died of her wounds. Here are particulars of a bank robbery organized five years ago by a number of people who called themselves anarchists, but who were in reality very commonplace, conventional thieves unpossessed of any respect for human life. But I see this does not interest you."

He closed the dossier and put it back into its envelope, before he looked up at the Count's face. The man was pale now, with a waxen pallor of death.

"They are very interesting," he muttered.

He stumbled rather than walked the length of the room, and he had not recovered when they reached the corridor.

"This is the way out," said T. B., as he indicated the broad stairs. "I advise you, Count Poltavo, to step warily. It will be my duty to inform the Russian police that you are at present in this country. Whether they move or do not move is a problematical matter. Your fellow-countrymen are not specially energetic where crimes of five years' standing are concerned. But this I warn you,"—he dropped his hand upon the other's shoulder,—"that if you stand in my way I shall give you trouble which will have much more serious consequences for you."

Three minutes later Poltavo walked out of Scotland Yard like a man in a dream. He hailed the first cab that came past and drove back to his flat. He was there for ten minutes and emerged with a handbag.

He drove to the Grand Marylebone Hotel, and detective inspector Ela, who had watched his every movement, followed in another taxi. He waited until he saw Poltavo enter the hotel, then the officer descended some distance from the door, and walked nonchalantly to the entrance.

There was no sign of Poltavo.

Ela strolled carelessly through the corridor, and down into the big palm court. From the palm court another entrance led into the Marylebone Road. Ela quickened his steps, went through the big swing doors to the vestibule.

Yes, the porter on duty had seen the gentleman; he had called a taxi and gone a few minutes before.

Ela cursed himself for his folly in letting the man out of his sight.

He reported the result of his shadowing to T. B. Smith over the telephone, and T. B. was frankly uncomplimentary.

"However, I think I know where we will pick him up," he said. "Meet me at Waterloo; we must catch the 6:15 to Great Bradley."

CHAPTER XI

"You want to see Mr. Moole?" Dr. Fall asked the visitor.

"I wish to see Mr. Moole," replied Poltavo. He stood at the door of the Secret House, and after a brief scrutiny the big-faced doctor admitted him, closing the door behind him.

"Tell me, what do you want?" he asked. He had seen the curious gesture that Poltavo had made—the pass sign which had unbarred the entrance to many strange people.

"I want to see Farrington!" replied Poltavo, coolly.

"Farrington!" Fall's brow knit in a puzzled frown.

"Farrington," repeated Poltavo, impatiently. "Do not let us have any of this nonsense, Fall. I want to see him on a matter of urgency. I am Poltavo."

"I know just who you are," said Fall, calmly, "but why you should come here under the impression that the late Mr. Farrington is an inmate of this establishment I do not understand. We are a lunatic asylum, not a mortuary," he said, with heavy humour.

Still, he led the way upstairs to the drawing-room on the first floor.

"What is the trouble?" he asked, as he closed the door behind him.

Poltavo chose to tell the story of his identification by T. B. Smith rather than the real object of his journey. Fall listened in silence.

"I doubt very much whether he will see you," he said: "he is in his worst mood. However, I will go along and find out what his wishes are."

He was absent for ten minutes, and when he returned he beckoned to the visitor.

Poltavo followed him up the stairs till he came to the room in which the bedridden Mr. Moole lay.

A man turned as the two visitors came in—it was Farrington in the life, Farrington as he had seen him on the night of his disappearance from the box at the Jollity. The big man nodded curtly.

"Why have you come down here," he asked, harshly, "leading half the detectives in London to me?"

"I do not think you need bother about half the detectives in London," said Poltavo. He looked at Fall. "I want to see you alone," he said.

Farrington nodded his head and the other departed, closing the door behind him.

"Now," said Poltavo,—he crossed the room with two strides,—"I want to know what you mean—you treacherous dog—by this infernal will of yours!"

"You can sit down," said Farrington, coolly, "and you can learn right now, Poltavo, that I do not stand for any man questioning me as to why I should do this or that, and I certainly do not stand for any human being in the world speaking to me as you are doing."

"You know that you are in my power," said Poltavo, viciously. "Are you aware that I could raise my finger and tumble your precious plot into the dust?"

"There are many things I know," said Farrington, "and if you knew them too you would keep a civil tongue in your head. Sit down. What is the trouble?"

"Why did you leave that instruction in your will? That Doris was to marry this infernal Doughton?"

"For a very good reason."

"Explain the reason!" stormed the angry man.

"I shall do nothing so absurd," smiled Farrington, crookedly; "it is enough when I say I want this girl's happiness. Don't you realize," he went on rapidly, "that the only thing I have in my life, that is at all clean, or

precious, or worth while, is my affection for my niece? I want to see her happy; I know that her happiness lies with Doughton."

"You are mad," snarled the other; "the girl is half in love with me."

"With you," Farrington's eyes narrowed; "that is absolutely impossible."

"Why impossible?" demanded Poltavo loudly; "why impossible?" He thumped the table angrily.

"For many reasons," said Farrington. "First, because you are unworthy to be her under-gardener, much less her husband. You are, forgive my frankness, a blackguard, a thief, a murderer, a forger and a bank robber, so far as I know." He smiled. "Yes, I was an interested listener to your conversation with Fall. I have all sorts of weird instruments here by which I can pick up unguarded items of talk, but fortunately I have no need to be informed on this subject. I have as complete a record of your past as our friend Smith, and I tell you, Poltavo, that whilst I am willing that you shall be my agent, and that you shall profit enormously by working hand in hand with me, I would sooner see myself dead than I should hand Doris over to your tender mercies."

An ugly smile played about the lips of Poltavo.

"That is your last word?" he asked.

"That is my last word," said Farrington; "if you will be advised by me, you will let the matter stand where it is. Leave things as they are, Poltavo. You are on the way to making a huge fortune; do not let this absurd sentiment, or this equally absurd ambition of yours, step in and spoil everything."

"And whatever happens you would never allow Doris to marry me?"

"That is exactly what I meant, and exactly what I still say," said Farrington, firmly.

"But, suppose,"—Poltavo's hands caressed his little moustache, and he was smiling wickedly,—"suppose I force your hand?"

Farrington's eyebrows rose. "How?" he demanded.

"Suppose I take advantage of the fact that Miss Doris Gray, an impressionable young English girl, receptive to sympathetic admiration and half in love with me—suppose, I say, I took advantage of this fact, and we marry in the face of your will?"

"You would be sorry," said Farrington, grimly; "you may be sorry that you even threatened as much."

"I not only threaten," snarled Poltavo, "but I will carry out my threat, and you interfere with me at your peril!" He shook his clenched fist in Farrington's face. The elder man looked at him with a long, earnest glance in which his keen eyes seemed to search the very soul of the Russian.

"I wish this had not happened," he said, half to himself. "I had hoped that there was the making of a useful man in you, Poltavo, but I have been mistaken. I never thought that sentiment would creep in. Is it money—her fortune?" he asked, suddenly.

Poltavo shook his head.

"Curse the money," he said, roughly; "I want the girl. I tell you, Farrington, every day she grows more precious and more desirable to me."

"Other women have become precious and desirable to you," said Farrington in a low, passionate voice, "and they have enjoyed the fleeting happiness of your favour for—how long? Just as long as you wanted, Poltavo, and when you have been satisfied and sated yourself with joy, you have cast them out as they had been nothing to you. I know your record, my man," he said. "All that I want now is to assure myself that you are in earnest, because if you are——" He paused.

"If I am——?" sneered Poltavo.

"You will not leave this house alive," said Farrington.

He said it in a matter-of-fact tone, and the full significance of his speech did not dawn upon the Russian until long after he had said it.

For the space of a second or two his lips were smiling, and then the smile suddenly froze. His hand went back to his hip pocket and reappeared, holding a long-barrelled automatic pistol.

"Don't you try any of your tricks on me," he breathed. "I am quite prepared for all eventualities, Mr. Farrington; you make a mistake to threaten me."

"Not such a mistake as you have made," smiled Farrington. "You may fire your pistol to see if it will go off. My own impression is that the magazine has been removed."

One glance at the weapon was sufficient to demonstrate to the other that the man had spoken the truth. He went deathly white.

"Look here," he said, genially, "let us make an end to this absurd breach of friendship. I have come down to see what I can do for you."

"You have come down now to force me to grant your wishes regarding Doris," said Farrington. "I think the matter had better end." He pressed the bell, and Fall came in after a few moments' interval.

"Give the Count some refreshment before he goes," he said; "he is going to London."

The very matter-of-factness of the instructions reassured Count Poltavo, who for one moment had stood in a panic of fear; there was that in this big silent house which terrified him. And with the removal of this fear his insolent assurance returned. He stood in the doorway.

"You have made up your mind about Doris?" he said.

"Absolutely," said Farrington.

"Very good," said Poltavo.

He followed Fall along the corridor, and the doctor opened a small door and illuminated a tiny lift inside, and Poltavo stepped in. As he did so the door clicked.

"How do I work this lift?" he asked through the ornamental ironwork of the doorway.

"I work it from outside," said Dr. Fall, cheerfully, and pressed a button. The lift sank. It passed one steel door—that was the first floor; and another—that was the ground floor, but still the lift did not stop. It went on

falling slowly, evenly, without jar or haste, and suddenly it came to a stop before a door made of a number of thin steel bars placed horizontally. As the lift stopped, the steel-barred doorway opened noiselessly. All Poltavo's senses were now alert; he, a past master in the art of treachery, had been at last its victim. He did not leave the tiny lift for a moment, but prepared for eventualities. He took a pencil out of his pocket and wrote rapidly on the wooden panelling of the elevator, and then he stepped out into the semi-darkness. He saw a large apartment, a bed and chair, and above a large table one dim light. A number of switches on the wall facing him promised further illumination. Anyway, if the worst came to the worst, he could find a way by the lift well to safety again. He searched his pockets with feverish haste. He usually carried one or two pistol cartridges in case of necessity, and he was rewarded, for, in his top waistcoat pocket, he discovered two nickel-pointed shapes. Hastily he removed the dummy magazine from the butt of his pistol. The removal of the magazine must have been effected by his servant, and the servant, now he came to give the matter consideration, was possibly in the pay of Farrington, and had probably warned the occupants of the Secret House of Poltavo's departure.

It was but natural that the big man would take no chances, and Poltavo cursed himself for a fool for allowing himself to be lured into a sense of security. He stepped out of the lift; there was enough light to guide him across the room. He reached the switchboard and pulled one of the little levers. Three lights appeared at the far end of the room; he pulled over the rest and the room was brilliantly illuminated.

It was an underground chamber, with red, distempered walls, artistically furnished. The small bed in the corner was of brass; the air was conveyed to his gloomy chamber by means of ventilators placed at intervals in the wall.

Not an uncomfortable prison, thought Poltavo. He was making his inspection when he heard a clang, and swung round. The steel door of the lift had closed and he reached it just in time to see the floor of the little cage ascending out of sight. He cursed himself again for his insensate folly; he might have fixed the door with a chair; it was an elementary precaution to take, but he had not realized the possibilities of this house of mystery.

Perhaps the chairs were fixed. He tried them, but found he was mistaken, except in one case. The great chair at the head of the table, solid and heavy, was immovable, for it was clamped to the floor.

In one corner was a framework, and he guessed it to be the slide in which the small provision lift ran.

His surmise was accurate, for even while he was examining it, a trap opened in the ceiling, and there slid down noiselessly between the oiled grids a tiny platform on which was a tray filled with covered dishes. He lifted the viands from the little elevator to the table and inspected them. There was a note written in pencil.

"You need have no fear in consuming the food we provide for you," it ran. "Dr. Fall will personally vouch for its purity, and will, if necessary, sample it in your presence. If you should need attendance you will find a small bell fixed on the under side of the table."

Poltavo looked at the dinner. He was ravenously hungry; he must take the chance of poison; after all, these people had him so completely in their power that there was no necessity to take any precaution so far as his food was concerned. He attacked an excellent dinner without discomfort to himself, and when he had finished he bethought himself of the bell, and finding it under the edge of the table, he pressed the button. He had not long to wait; he heard the faint hum of machinery and walked across to the barred gate of the lift, his pistol ready. He waited, his eyes fixed up at the black square through which he expected the lift to sink, and heard himself suddenly called by name.

He turned; Doctor Fall was standing in the centre of the room. By what means he had arrived there was no evidence to show.

"I hope I did not surprise you," said the doctor, with his quiet smile; "I did not come the way you expected. There are three entrances to this room, and they are all equally difficult to negotiate."

"May I inquire the meaning of this outrage?" asked Poltavo.

"Your virtuous indignation does you credit, Count," said the doctor. He sat down by the table, took a cigar-case from his pocket, and offered it to his

unwilling guest.

"You do not smoke; I am sorry. Would you like a cigarette?"

"Thank you, I have all the cigarettes I require," said Poltavo, briefly.

The doctor did not speak until he had leisurely bitten off the end of a cigar and lit it.

"As I say," he went on, "I admire your *sang froid*. The word 'outrage' comes curiously from you, Count, but I am merely carrying out Mr. Farrington's wishes, when I say that I am perfectly willing to explain your present unhappy position. In some way you have made our friend very angry," he went on, easily; "and at present he is disposed to treat you with considerable harshness, to mete out the same harsh justice, in fact, that he accorded to two of the people who were engaged in the building of this house, and who were predisposed to blackmail him with a threat of betrayal."

"I knew nothing of these," said Poltavo.

"Then you are one of the few people in London who do not," said Dr. Fall, with a smile. "One was an architect, the other a fairly efficient man of a type you will find on the continent of Europe, and who will be an electrician's assistant or a waiter with equal felicity. These men were engaged to assist in the construction of the house, they were brought from Italy with a number of other workmen, and entrusted with a section of its completion. Not satisfied with the handsome pay they received for their workmanship, they instituted a system of blackmail which culminated one night at Brakely Square in their untimely death."

"Did Farrington kill them?" gasped Poltavo.

"I will not go so far as to say that," said the suave secretary; "I only say that they died. Unfortunately for them, they were acting independently of one another and quarrelled violently when they found that they had both come upon a similar errand, having at last identified the mysterious gentleman, who had commissioned the house, with Gregory Farrington, a worthy and blackmailable millionaire."

"So that was it," said Poltavo, thoughtfully.

"What a fool I was not to understand, not to see the connection. They were shot dead outside Farrington's house. Who else could have committed the crime but he?"

"Again, I will not go so far as to say that," repeated the secretary; "I merely remark that the men died a most untimely death, as a result of their eagerness to extract advantages from Mr. Farrington, which he was not prepared to offer. You, Count Poltavo, are in some danger of sharing the same fate."

"I have been in tighter holes than this," smiled Poltavo, but he was uneasy.

"Do not boast," said the doctor quietly. "I doubt very much whether in your life you have been in so tight a hole as you are in now. We are quite prepared to kill you; I tell you that much, because Mr. Farrington does not ordinarily take risks. In your case, however, he is prepared, just so long as you are impressed with his power to punish, to give you one chance of life. Whether you take that chance or not entirely depends upon yourself. He will not extract any oaths or promises or pledges of any kind; he will release you with the assurance that if you will serve him you will be handsomely rewarded, and if you fail him you will be most handsomely killed; do I make myself clear?"

"Very," said Poltavo, and the hand that raised the cigarette to his lips trembled a little.

"I would like to add," began the doctor, when the shrill sound of a ringing bell rang through the vaulted apartment. Fall sprang up, walked quietly to the wall, and placed his ear against a portion which appeared to be no different to any other, but which, as Poltavo gathered, concealed a hidden telephone.

"Yes?" he asked. He listened. "Very good," he said.

He turned to Poltavo, and surveyed him gravely.

"You will be interested to learn," he said, "that the house is entirely surrounded by police. You have evidently been followed here."

A light sprang into Poltavo's eyes.

"That is very awkward for you," he said, with a laugh.

"More awkward for you, I think," said Doctor Fall, walking slowly to the farthermost wall of the room.

"Stop!" said Poltavo.

The doctor turned. He was covered by the black barrel of Poltavo's pistol.

"I beg to assure you," said the Count mockingly, "that this pistol is loaded with two small cartridges which I found in my waistcoat pocket, and which I usually carry in case of emergency. There is at any rate sufficient ____"

He said no more, for suddenly the room was plunged in darkness, the lights were extinguished by an unseen hand as at some signal, and a mocking laugh came back to him from where Fall had stood.

"Shoot!" said the voice, but the two cartridges were too precious for Poltavo to take any risks in the dark. He stood waiting, suddenly heard a click, and then the lights came up again. He was alone in the room. He shrugged his shoulders; there was nothing to do but wait.

If T. B. Smith had followed him here, and if he had taken the drastic step of surrounding the house with police, there was hope that he might be rescued from his present unhappy plight. If not, he had the promise which Farrington had given of his release on terms.

He heard the whirr of the descending lift; this time it was the elevator by which he himself had descended. It came to a halt at the floor level and the steel gates swung open invitingly. He must take his chance; anyway, anything was better than remaining in this underground room.

He stepped into the lift and pulled the gates close after him. To his surprise they answered readily, and as the lock snapped the lift went upwards slowly. Two overhanging electric lamps illuminated the little elevator. They were dangerous to him. With the steel barrel of his pistol he smashed the bulbs and crouched down in the darkness, his finger on the trigger, ready for any emergency.

T. B. Smith was standing in the hall, and behind him three hard-featured men from the Yard. Before him was Dr. Fall, imperturbable and obeying as ever.

"You are perfectly at liberty to search the house," he was saying, "and, as far as Count Poltavo is concerned, there is no mystery whatever. He is one of the people who have been attracted here by curiosity, and at the present moment he is inspecting the wonders of our beautiful establishment."

There was something of truth in his ironic tone, and T. B. was puzzled.

"Will you kindly produce Count Poltavo?"

"With pleasure," said the secretary.

It was at that moment that the lift door opened and Poltavo stepped out, pistol in hand.

He saw the group and took in its significance. He had now to decide in that moment with whom he should run. His mind was made up quickly; he knew he had no friends in the police force; whatever prosperity awaited him must come from Farrington and his influence.

"An interesting weapon you have in your hand, Count," drawled T. B. "Do I understand that you have been inspecting the art treasures of the Secret House in some fear of your life?"

"Not at all," said Poltavo, as he slipped the pistol into his pocket. "I have merely been engaged in a little pistol practice in the underground shooting gallery; it is an interesting place; you should see it."

Dr. Fall's eyes did not leave the face of his late prisoner, and Poltavo saw an approving gleam in the dark eyes.

"I should not, ordinarily, take the trouble to inspect your shooting gallery," said T. B. Smith with a smile, "because I know that you are not speaking the exact truth, Count Poltavo. My own impression is that you have every reason to be thankful for my arrival. In the present circumstances, perhaps, it would be advisable to look over a portion of your domain which, so far, has escaped my inspection."

The doctor shrugged his shoulders.

"It is hardly a shooting gallery, but since it is so far removed from the living portion of the house we sometimes use it for that purpose," he said. "I have not the slightest objection to your descending."

T. B. entered the lift. It was in darkness, as a result of Poltavo's precautions.

"I will go alone," said T. B., and Fall, with a little bow, closed the gates, and the lift descended.

They waited some time; Fall had the power, from where he was, of closing the gates below and bringing the lift up again. This Poltavo knew to his cost, but there were good reasons why the doctor should not exercise his knowledge, and in a few minutes the lift came back to its original position and T. B. stepped out.

"Thank you, I have learned all I want to know," he said with a keen glance at Poltavo. "Really, you have an extraordinary house, Dr. Fall."

"It is always open to your inspection," said the doctor, with a heavy smile.

T. B. was fingering the little electric lamp, which he carried in his hand, in an absent-minded manner. Presently he put it into his pocket, and, with a nod to his host, walked across the hall. He turned suddenly and addressed Poltavo.

"When you were trapped in this house," he said, quietly, "and expected considerable trouble in escaping from the trap, you took the precaution, like the careful man that you are, of inscribing a message which might aid those who came to your relief. This message has now served its purpose," he smiled, as he saw the look of consternation on Poltavo's face, "and you will be well advised to invite your friend to wipe it out"; and with another nod he passed from the house, followed by his three men.

"What does this mean?" asked Fall, quickly.

"I—I—" stammered Poltavo, flustered for once in his life, "wrote on the side of the lift a few words only, nothing incriminating, my dear doctor, just a line to say that I was imprisoned below."

With a curse Fall dashed into the little elevator.

"Bring a light," he said, and struck a match to read the scrawl which Poltavo had written. Fortunately there was nothing in it which betrayed the great secret of the house, but it was enough, as he realized, to awaken the dormant suspicion, even supposing it was dormant, of this indefatigable detective.

"You have made a nice mess of things," he said to Poltavo, sternly; "see that you do not make a greater. We will forgive you once, but the second attempt will be fatal."

CHAPTER XII

The distant chime of Little Bradley church had struck one o'clock, when T. B. Smith stepped from the shadow of the hedge on the east side of the Secret House, and walked slowly toward the road. Two men, crouched in the darkness, rose silently to meet him.

"I think I have found a place," said T. B., in a low voice. "As I thought, there are electric alarms on the top of the walls, and electric wires threaded through all the hedges. There is a break, however, where, I think, I can circumvent the alarm."

He led the way back to the place from which he had been making his reconnaissance.

"Here it is," said T. B.

He touched a thin twine-like wire with his finger. The third man put the concentrated ray of an electric lamp upon it.

"I can make another circuit for this," he said, and pulled a length of wire from his pocket. Two minutes later, thanks to quick manipulation of his wire, they were able to step in safety across the wall and drop noiselessly into the grounds.

"We shall find a man on duty," whispered T. B.; "he is patrolling the house, and I have an idea that there are trip-wires on the lawn."

He had fixed a funnel-like arrangement to the head of his lamp, and now he carefully scrutinized the ground as he walked forward. The funnel was so fixed that it showed no light save on the actual patch of ground he was surveying.

"Here is one," he said, suddenly.

The party stepped cautiously over the almost invisible line of wire, supported a few inches from the ground by steel uprights, placed at regular

intervals.

"They fix these every night after sunset; I have watched them doing it," said T. B. "There is another line nearer the house."

They found this, too, and carefully negotiated it.

"Down!" whispered T. B. suddenly, and the party sank flat on the turf.

Ela for a moment could not see the cause for alarm, but presently he discerned the slow moving figure of the sentry as it passed between them and the house. The man was walking leisurely along, and even in the starlight they could see the short rifle slung at his shoulder. They waited until he had disappeared round the corner of the house, and then crossed the remaining space of lawn. T. B. had been carrying a little canvas bag, and now he put his hand inside and withdrew by the ears a struggling rabbit.

"Little friend," he whispered, "You must be sacrificed in the cause of scientific criminal investigation."

He mounted the steps which led to the entrance hall. The steel-beaded curtain still hung before the door almost brushing the mat as he had seen it. He released the rabbit, and the startled beast, after a vain attempt to escape back to the lawn, went with hesitating hop on to the mat, and then, at a threatening gesture from T. B., pushed his nose to the hanging curtain to penetrate his way to safety. Instantly as he touched it there was a quick flicker of blue light, and the unfortunate animal was hurled back past T. B. to the gravel path below. The detective descended hastily and picked it up. It was quite dead. He felt the singed hair about its head, and murmured a sympathetic "vale."

"As I suspected," he said in a low voice, "an electric death-trap for anybody trying to get into the house that way. Now, Johnson."

The third man was busy pulling out a pair of rubber boots; he took from his pocket a pair of thick rubber gloves, and made his way with confidence up the steps. He leant down and tried to pull the mat from its place, but that was impossible. He gathered up the beads cautiously with his hands; he was free, by reason of his boots and his hand-covering, from the danger

of a shock, but he took good care that no portion of the curtain touched any other part of his body. Very cautiously he drew the bead "chick" aside, looping it back by means of strong rubber bands, and then T. B. went forward. In the meantime he had followed the other's example, and had drawn stout rubber goloshes over his feet and had put on gloves of a similar material. The lock that he had noticed earlier in the day was of a commonplace type; the only danger was that the inmates had taken the precaution of bolting or chaining the door, but apparently they were content with the protection which their electric curtain might reasonably be expected to afford. The door opened after a brief manipulation of keys, and T. B. stepped into the hall. He listened, all his senses strained, for the sound of a warning bell, but none came. Ela and the other man followed.

"Better remain in the hall," said T. B. "We shall have to chance the guard not noticing what has happened to the curtain, anyway; perhaps he will not be round for some time," he added, hopefully.

They made a quick scrutiny of the hall, and found no indication of cables or of wires which would suggest that an alarm had been fixed. T. B. stole carefully up the stairs, leaving the two men to guard the hall below. At every landing he halted, and listened, but the house was wrapped in silence, and he searched the third floor without mishap.

He recognized the corridor, having taken very careful note of certain peculiarities, and a scratch on the side of the lift door, which he had mentally noted for future reference, showed him he was on the right track.

Unerringly and swiftly he passed along the passage till he came to the big rosewood doors which opened upon the invalid's bedroom. He turned the handle gently, it yielded, and he stepped noiselessly through the door, and pushed the inner door cautiously. The room was dimly illuminated, evidently by a night light, thought T. B., and he pressed the door farther open that he might secure a better view of the apartment, and then he gasped, for this was not the room he had been in before.

It was a sumptuously arranged bureau, panelled in rosewood, and set about with costly furniture. A man was sitting at the desk, busily writing by the light of a table lamp; his back was toward T. B. The detective pushed the

door farther open, and suddenly the man at the desk leapt up, and turning round, confronted the midnight visitor.

T. B. had only time to see that his face was hidden behind a black mask which extended from his forehead to his chin. As soon as he saw T. B. standing in the doorway, he reached out his hand. Instantly the room was in darkness, and the door, which T. B. was holding ajar, was suddenly forced back as if by an irresistible power, flinging the detective into the corridor, which almost simultaneously was flooded with light. T. B. turned to meet the smiling face of Dr. Fall.

The big man, with his white, expressionless countenance, was regarding him gravely, and with amused resentment.

Where he had come from T. B. could only conjecture; he had appeared as if by magic and was fully dressed.

"To what do I owe the honour of this visit, Mr. Smith?" he said, in his dry, grim way.

"A spirit of curiosity," said T. B., coolly. "I was anxious to secure another peep at your Mr. Moole."

"And how did he look?" asked the other, with a faint smile.

"Unfortunately," said T. B., "I have mistaken the floor, and instead of seeing our friend, I have unexpectedly and quite unwittingly interrupted a gentleman who, for reasons best known to himself, has hidden his face."

Dr. Fall frowned.

"I do not quite follow you," he said.

"Perhaps if I were to follow you back to the room," said T. B. good-humouredly, "you might understand better."

He heard a strange wailing sound and a shivering motion beneath his feet, as though a heavy traction engine were passing close to the house.

"What is that?" he asked.

"It is one of the unpleasant consequences of building one's house over a disused coal-mine," said the doctor easily; "but as regards your strange hallucination," he went on, "I should rather like to disabuse your mind of your fantastic vision."

He walked slowly back to the room which T. B. had quitted, and the inner door yielded to his touch. It was in darkness. Dr. Fall put his hand inside the room and there was a click of a switch.

"Come in," he said, and T. B. stepped into the room.

It was the room he had left in the earlier part of the day. There was the blue square of carpet and the silver bedstead, and the same yellow face and unwinking eyes of the patient. The walls were panelled in myrtle, the same electrolier hung from the ceiling as he had seen on his previous visit. Smith gasped, and passed his hand over his forehead.

"You see," said the secretary, "you have been the victim of a peculiar and unhappy trick of eyesight; in fact, Mr. Smith, may I suggest that you have been dreaming?"

"You may suggest just what you like," said T. B. pleasantly. "I should like to see the room below and the room above."

"With pleasure," said the other; "there is a storeroom up above which you may see if you wish."

He led the way upstairs, unlocked the door of the room immediately over that which they had just left, and entered. The room was bare, and the plain deal floor, the distempered walls, and the high skylight showed it to be just as the doctor had described, a typical storeroom.

"You do not seem to use it," said T. B.

"We are very tidy people," smiled the doctor; "and now you shall see the room below."

As they went down the stairs again they heard the curious wail, and T. B. experienced a tremulous jar which he had noted before.

"Unpleasant, is it not?" said Dr. Fall. "I was quite alarmed at that at first, but it has no unpleasant consequences."

On the second floor he entered the third room, immediately below that in which the sick Mr. Moole was lying. He unlocked this door and they entered a well-furnished bedroom; on a more elaborate scale than that which T. B. had seen before.

"This is our spare bedroom," said Dr. Fall, easily; "we seldom use it."

T. B. slipped into the apartment and made a quick scrutiny. There was nothing of a suspicious character here.

"I hope you are satisfied now," said Dr. Fall as he led the way out, "and that your two friends below are not growing impatient."

"You have seen them, then," said T. B.

"I have seen them," said the other gravely. "I saw them a few moments after you entered the hall. You see, Mr. Smith," he went on, "we do not employ anything so vulgar as bells to alarm us. When the entrance door opens, a red light shows above my bed. Unfortunately, the moment you came in I happened to be in an adjoining room at work. I had to go into my bedroom to get a paper, when I saw the light. So, though I am perhaps inaccurate in saying that I have been keeping you under observation from the moment you arrived, there was little you did which was not witnessed. I will show you, if you will be good enough to accompany me to my room."

"I shall be delighted," said T. B.

He was curious to learn anything that the house or its custodian could teach him. Dr. Fall's room was on the first floor, immediately over the entrance hall, a plain office with a door leading to a cosily, though comparatively expensively furnished bedroom. By the side of the doctor's bed was a round pillar, which looked for all the world like one of those conventional and useless articles of furniture which the suburban housewife employs to balance a palm upon.

"Look down into that," said the doctor.

T. B. obeyed. It was quite hollow, and a little way down was what appeared to be a square sheet of silver paper. It was unlike any other silver paper because it appeared to be alive. He could see figures standing against it, two figures that he had no difficulty in recognizing as Ela and Johnson.

"It is a preparation of my own," said the doctor. "I thought of taking out a patent for it. An adjustment of mirrors throws the image upon a luminous screen which is so sensitive to light that it can record an impression of your two friends even in the semi-darkness of the hall."

"Thank you," said T. B.

There was nothing to do but to accept his defeat as graciously as possible. For baffled he was, caught at every turn, and puzzled, moreover, by his extraordinary experience.

"You will find some difficulty in opening the door," said the pleasant Doctor Fall.

"In that I think you are mistaken," smiled T. B.

The doctor stopped to switch on the light, and the two discomforted detectives watched the scene curiously.

"We have left the door ajar."

"Still I think you will find a difficulty in getting out," insisted the other. "Open the door."

Ela pulled at it, but it was impossible to move the heavy oaken panel.

"Electrically controlled," said the doctor; "and you can neither move it one way nor the other. It is an ingenious idea of mine, for which I may also apply for a patent one of these days."

He took a key from his pocket and inserted it in an almost invisible hole in the oak panelling of the hall; instantly the door opened slowly.

"I wish you a very good night," said Doctor Fall, as they stood on the steps. "I hope we shall meet again."

"You may be sure," said T. B. Smith, grimly, "that we shall."

CHAPTER XIII

Doris Gray was face to face with a dilemma. She stood in a tragic position; even now, she could not be sure that her guardian was dead. But dead or alive, he had left her a terrible problem, for terrible it seemed to her, for solution.

She liked Frank Doughton well enough, but she was perhaps too young, had too small a knowledge of the great elements of life to appreciate fully her true feelings in the matter; and then the influence of this polished man of the world, this Count of the Roman Empire as he described himself, with his stories of foreign capitals, his easy conversation, his acquaintance with all the niceties of social intercourse, had made a profound impression upon her. At the moment, she might not say with any certainty, whether she preferred the young Englishman or this suave man of the world.

The balance was against Frank, and the command contained in the will, the knowledge that she must, so she told herself, make something of a sacrifice, was a subject for resentment. Not even the sweetest girl in the world, obeying as she thought the command of a dead man, who was especially fond and proud of her, could be compensated for the fact that he had laid upon her his dead hands, charging her to obey a command which might very easily be repugnant and hateful to her.

She did not, in truth, wish to marry anybody. She could well afford to allow the question of her fortune to lapse; she had at least five years in which to make up her mind, as to how she felt toward Frank Doughton. She liked him, there was something especially invigorating and wholesome in his presence and in his very attitude towards her. He was so courteous, so kindly, so full of quick, strong sympathy and yet—there were some depths he could not touch, she told herself, and was vague herself as to what those depths were.

She was strolling in Green Park on a glorious April morning, in a complacent mood, for the trees were in fresh green bud and the flower beds were a blaze of colour, when she met Frank, and Frank was so

obviously exhilarated that something of his enthusiasm was conveyed to her. He saw her before she had seen him, and came with quickening footsteps toward her.

"I say," he said explosively, "I have some splendid news!"

"Let us sit down," she said, with a kindly smile, and made a place for him by her side on a bench near by. "Now, what is this wonderful news?"

"You remember Mr. Farrington gave me a commission to find the missing heir of Tollington?"

She nodded.

"Well, I have found him," he said, triumphantly; "it is an extraordinary thing," he went on, "that I should have done so, because I am not a detective. I told Mr. Farrington quite a long time ago that I never expected to make any discovery which would be of any use to him. You see Mr. Farrington was not able to give me any very definite data to work on. It appears that old Tollington had a nephew, the son of his dead sister, and it was to this nephew that his fortune was left. Tollington's sister had been engaged to a wealthy Chicago stockbroker, and the day before the wedding she had run away with an Englishman, with whom her family was acquainted, but about whom they knew very little. She guessed that he was a ne'er-do-well, who had come out to the States to redeem his fallen fortune. But he was not a common adventurer apparently, for he not only refused to communicate with the girl's parents, although he knew they were tremendously wealthy, but he never allowed them to know his real name. It appears that he was in Chicago under a name which was not his own. From that moment they lost sight of him. In a roundabout way they learned that he had gone back to England and that he had by his own efforts and labours established himself there. This news was afterwards confirmed. The girl was in the habit of writing regularly to her parents, giving neither her surname nor address. They answered through the columns of the London *Times*. That is how, though they knew where she was situated, all efforts to get in touch with her proved to be unavailing; and when her parents died, and her brother renewed his search, he was met with a blank wall. You see," Frank went on, a little naïvely, "it is quite

impossible to discover anybody when their name is not even known to one."

"I see," smiled the girl; "and have you succeeded where all these people have failed?"

"I have hardly progressed so far as that," he laughed. "What I have discovered is this: that the man, who seventy years ago left the United States with the sister of old Tollington, lived for some years in Great Bradley."

"Great Bradley!" she said, in surprise; "why, isn't that where Lady Constance Dex lives?"

He nodded.

"Everybody seems to live there," he said, ruefully; "even our friend," he hesitated.

"Our friend?" she repeated, inquiringly.

"Your friend Poltavo is there now," he said, "permanently established as the guest of Dr. Fall. You have heard of the Secret House?—but everybody in England has heard of it."

"I am afraid that everybody does not include me," she smiled, "but go on with your story; how did you find that he lived in Great Bradley?"

"Well, it was rather a case of luck," he explained. "You see, I lived some years in Great Bradley myself; that is where I first met your uncle. I was a little boy at the time. But it wasn't my acquaintance with Great Bradley which helped me. Did you see in the paper the other day the fact that, in pulling down an old post office building, a number of letters were discovered which had evidently slipped through the floor of the old letter-box, and had not been delivered?"

"I read something about it," she smiled; "forty or fifty years old, were they not?"

He nodded.

"One of these," he said, quietly, "was addressed to Tollington, and was signed by his sister. I saw it this morning at the General Post Office. I happened to spot the paragraph, which was sent in to my paper, to the effect that these letters had been undelivered for forty or fifty years, and fortunately our correspondent at Great Bradley had secured a list of the addresses. I saw that one of these was to George Tollington of Chicago, and on the off chance I went down to Great Bradley. Thanks to the courtesy of the Postmaster-General I was able to copy the letter. It was a short one."

He fumbled in his pocket and produced a sheet of paper.

"DEAR GEORGE," he read, "this is just to tell you that we are quite well and prosperous. I saw your advertisement in the *Times* newspaper and was pleased to hear from you. Henry sends to you his kindest regards and duties.

"Your loving sister,

"ANNIE."

"Of course, it is not much to go on," he said apologetically, folding the letter up and replacing it in his pocket. "I suppose Great Bradley has had a constant procession of Annies, but at any rate it is something."

"It is indeed," she smiled.

"It means quite a lot to me, or at least it did," he corrected himself. "I had an arrangement with your uncle, which was approved by the other trustees of the estate. It means a tremendous lot," he repeated. There was some significance in his tone and she looked up to him quickly.

"In money?" she asked.

"In other things," he said, lowering his voice. "Doris, I have not had an opportunity of saying how sorry I am about the will; it is hateful that you should be forced by the wishes of your guardian to take a step which may be unpleasant to you."

She coloured a little and turned her eyes away.

"I—I do not want to take advantage of that wish," he went on awkwardly. "I want you to be happy. I want you to come to me for no other reason than the only one that is worth while; that you have learned to care for me as I care for you."

Still she made no response and he sighed heavily.

"Some day," he said, wistfully, "I had hoped to bring in my hands all the material advantages which a man can offer to the woman he loves."

"And do you think that would make a difference?" she asked quickly.

"It would make this difference," he replied, in the same quiet tone, "that you could not think of me as one who loved you for your fortune, or one who hoped to gain anything from the marriage but the dearest, sweetest woman in the world."

The eyes which she turned upon him were bright with unshed tears.

"I do not know how I feel, Frank," she said. "I am almost as much a mystery to myself as I must be to you. I care for you in a way, but I am not sure that I care for you as you would like me to."

"Is there anybody else?" he asked, after a pause.

She avoided his glance, and sat twining the cord of her sunshade about her fingers.

"There is nobody else—definitely," she said.

"Or tentatively?" he insisted.

"There are always tentative people in life," she smiled, parrying his question. "I think, Frank, you stand as great a chance as anybody." She shrugged her shoulders. "I speak as though I were some wonderful prize to

be bestowed; I assure you I do not feel at all like that. I have a very humble opinion of my own qualities. I do not think I have felt so meek or so modest about my own qualities as I do just now."

He walked with her to the end of the park, and saw her into a taxicab, standing on the pavement and watching as she was whirled into the enveloping traffic, out of sight.

As for Doris Gray, she herself was suffering from some uneasiness of mind. She needed a shock to make her realize one way or the other where her affections lay. Poltavo loomed very largely; his face, his voice, the very atmosphere which enveloped him, was constantly present with her.

She reached Brakely Square and would have passed straight up to her room, but the butler, with an air of importance, stopped her.

"I have a letter here, miss. It is very urgent. The messenger asked that it should be placed in your hands at the earliest possible moment."

She took the letter from him. It was addressed to her in typewritten characters. She stripped the envelope and found yet another inside. On it was typewritten:

"Read this letter when you are absolutely alone. Lock the door and be sure that nobody is near when you read it."

She raised her pretty eyebrows. What mystery was this? she asked. Still, she was curious enough to carry out the request. She went straight to her own room, opened the envelope, and took out a letter containing half a dozen lines of writing.

She gasped, and went white, for she recognized the hand the moment her eyes fell upon it. The letter she held in her shaking hand ran:

"I command you to marry Frank Doughton within seven days. My whole fortune and my very life may depend upon this."

It was signed "Gregory Farrington," and heavily underlined beneath the signature were the words, "Burn this, as you value my safety."

* * * * *

T. B. Smith stepped briskly into the office of his chief and closed the door behind him.

"What is the news?" asked Sir George, looking up.

"I can tell you all the news that I know," said T. B., "and a great deal that I do not know, but only surmise."

"Let us hear the facts first and the romance afterwards," growled Sir George, leaning back in his chair.

"Fact one," said T. B. drawing up a chair to the table, and ticking off his fact on the first finger of his hand, "is that Gregory Farrington is alive. The man whose body was picked up in the Thames is undoubtedly the gentleman who was shot in the raid upon the Custom House. The inference is, that Gregory was the second party in the raid, and that the attempt to secure the trunk of the admirable Dr. Goldworthy was carefully conceived. The box apparently contained a diary which gave away Gregory to one who had it in her power to do him an immense amount of harm."

"You refer to Lady Constance Dex?" asked the chief, interestedly.

T. B. nodded.

"That is the lady," he said. "Evidently Farrington has played it pretty low down upon her; was responsible for the death of her lover, and, moreover, for a great deal of her unhappiness. Farrington was the man who told George Doughton about some scandal of her youth, and Doughton, that

high-spirited man, went straight off to Africa without communicating with the lady or discovering how far she was guilty in the matter. The documents in the box would, I surmise, prove this to Lady Dex's satisfaction, and Farrington, who was well informed through his agents on the Coast, would have every reason for preventing these letters getting into the hands of a woman who would be remorseless in her vengeance."

"Is that fact established?" asked the chief.

"Pretty well," said T. B.

He took some papers out of his pocket and laid them on the desk before him.

"I have now got a copy of the letter which the dead lover wrote to Lady Constance. I need not say," he said lightly, "how I obtained possession of this, but we in our department do not hesitate to adopt the most drastic methods——"

"I know all about that," said the chief, with a little smile; "there was burglary at the rectory two days ago, and I presume your interesting burglar was your own Private Sikes."

"Exactly," said T. B. cheerfully. "Fact number two," he went on, "is that Gregory Farrington and the international blackmailer named Montague Fallock are one and the same person."

The chief looked up.

"You do not mean that?"

"I do indeed," said T. B. "That interesting paragraph in the will of the late Mr. Farrington confirms this view. The will was especially prepared to put me off the scent. Letters which have been received by eminent personages signed 'Montague Fallock' and demanding, as usual, money with threats of exposure have recently been received and confirm this theory."

"Where is Montague Fallock now?"

"Montague Fallock is an inmate of the Secret House," said T. B.

"It seems pretty easy to take him, does it not?" asked Sir George, in surprise. "Have you moved in the matter?"

T. B. shook his head.

"It is not so easy as you imagine," he said. "The Secret House contains more secrets than we can at present unravel. It was built, evidently and obviously, by a man of extraordinary mechanical genius as Farrington was, and the primary object with which it was built was to enable him on some future occasion to make his escape. I am perfectly certain that any attempt to raid the house would result immediately in the bird flying. We have got to wait patiently."

"What I cannot understand," said his chief, after awhile, "is why he should make a dramatic exit from the world."

"That is the easiest of all to explain," smiled T. B. "He was scared; he knew that I identified him with the missing Fallock; he knew, too, that I strongly suspected him of the murder of the two men in Brakely Square. Don't you see the whole thing fits together? He imported from various places on the Continent, and at various periods, workmen of every kind to complete the house at Great Bradley. Although he began his work thirty years ago, the actual finishing touches have not been made until within the last few years. Those finishing touches were the most essential. I have discovered that the two men who were shot in Brakely Square, were separately and individually employed in making certain alterations to the house and installing certain machinery.

"One was a young architect, the other was a general utility man. They were unknown to each other; each did his separate piece of work and was sent back to his native land. By some mischance they succeeded in discovering who their employer was, and they both arrived, unfortunately for them, simultaneously at the door of Fallock or Farrington's house with the object of blackmailing him. Farrington overheard the conversation; he admitted as much.

"He stood at the door, saw them flourishing their pistols and thought it was an excellent opportunity to rid himself of a very serious danger. He shot them from the doorway, closed the doorway behind him, and returned the

revolver to its drawer in his study, and came down in time to meet the policeman with energetic protestations of his terror. I smelt the powder when I went into the house; there is no mistaking the smell of cordite fired in so confined a place as the hallway of a house. And Lady Dex was also there; she must have witnessed the shooting."

"Why did she come?" asked the chief.

"My conjecture is that she came either to confront Farrington with evidence of his complicity, which is unlikely, or else to secure confirmation of the story her lover told in his last letter."

"But why shouldn't Farrington disappear in an ordinary way—or why need he disappear at all?" asked Sir George. "He had plenty of credit in the city. He had the handling of his niece's fortune. He could have blocked out your suspicion; he is not the kind of man to be scared of a little thing like that."

"That is where I am at sea," said T. B. "I must confess his disappearance is not consistent with his known character. He certainly had the fortune of the girl, and I have no doubt in my mind that he has a very genuine affection for his niece. Her inheritance, by the way, falls due next month; I do not suppose that had anything to do with it. If he had robbed her of it, or he had dissipated this money which was left in his care, one could have understood it, but the fact that he is dead will not restore the fortune if it is gone."

"What are you doing?" asked the chief.

"About Farrington?" asked T. B. "I am having the house kept under observation, and I am taking whatever precautions I can to prevent our friend from being scared. I am even attempting to lure him into the open. Once I can catch him outside of the Secret House, I think he will be a clever man to escape."

"And Poltavo?"

"He is in town," said T. B. "I think he will be a fairly easy man to circumvent; he is obviously acting now as the agent of our friend Farrington, and he is horribly proud of himself!"

CHAPTER XIV

As T. B. had said, Poltavo had returned from his brief sojourn in Great Bradley, and emerged into society a new and more radiant being than ever he had been before.

There had always been some doubt as to the Count's exact financial position, and cautious hostesses had hesitated before they had invited this plausible and polished man to their social functions. There were whispers adverse as to his standing; there were even bold people who called into question his right to employ the title which graced his visiting cards. There were half a dozen Poltavos in the *Almanack De Gotha*, any one of whom might have been Ernesto, for so vague is the Polish hierarchy that it was impossible to fix him to any particular family, and he himself answered careless inquiries with a cryptic smile which might have meant anything.

But with his return to London, after his brief absence, there was no excuse for any hostess, even the most sceptical, in refusing to admit him to social equality on the ground of poverty. The very day he returned he acquired the lease of a house in Burlington Gardens, purchased two motor-cars, paying cash down for an early delivery, gave orders left and right for the enrichment of his person and his domicile, and in forty-eight hours had established himself in a certain mode of living which suggested that he had never known any other.

He had had his lesson and had profited thereby. He had experienced an unpleasant fright, though he might not admit it to Dr. Fall and his master; it was nevertheless a fact that, realizing as he did that he had stood face to face with a particularly unpleasant death, he had been seized by a panic which had destroyed his ordinary equilibrium.

"You may trust me, my friend," he muttered to himself, as he sorted over the papers on his brand-new desk in his brand-new study, in a house which was still redolent of the painter's art and presence. "You may trust me just so long as I find it convenient for you to trust me, but you may be sure that

never again will I give you the benefit of my presence in the Secret House."

He had come back with a large sum of money to carry out his employer's plans. There were a hundred agents through the country, particulars of whom Poltavo now had in his possession. Innocent agents, and guilty agents; agents in high places and active agents in the servants' hall. Undoubtedly *Gossip's Corner* was a useful institution.

Farrington had not made a great deal of money from its sale; indeed, as often as not, it showed a dead loss every year. But he paid well for contributions which were sent to him, and offered a price, which exceeded the standard rate of pay, for such paragraphs as were acceptable.

Men and women, with a malicious desire to score off some enemy, would send him items which the newspapers would publish if they concerned somebody who might not be bled. Many of these facts in an amended form were, in fact, printed.

But more often than not the paragraphs and articles which came to the unknown editor dealt with scandal which it was impossible to put into print. Nevertheless, the informant would be rewarded. In some far-away country home a treacherous servant would receive postal orders to his or her great delight, but the news she or he had sent in their malice, a tit-bit concerning some poor erring woman or some foolish man, would never see the light of day, and the contributor might look in vain for the spicy paragraph which had been composed with such labour.

The unfortunate subjects of domestic treachery would receive in a day or two a letter from the mysterious Montague Fallock, retailing, to their horror, those precious secrets which they had imagined none knew but themselves. They would not associate the gossipy little rag, which sometimes found its way to the servants' hall, with the magnificent demand of this prince of blackmailers, and more often than not they would pay to the utmost of their ability to avoid exposure.

It was not only the servants' hall which supplied Montague Fallock with all the material for his dastardly work. There were men scarcely deserving the name, and women lost to all sense of honour, who found in this little

journal means by which they could "come back" at those favoured people who had offered them directly or indirectly some slight offence. Sometimes the communication would reach the *Gossip* anonymously, but if the facts retailed were sufficiently promising, one of Fallock's investigators would be told off to discover how much truth there was in it. A bland letter would follow, and the wretched victim would emerge from the transaction the poorer in pocket and often in health.

For this remorseless and ruthless man destroyed more than fortunes; he trafficked in human lives. There had been half a dozen mysterious suicides which had been investigated by Scotland Yard, and found directly traceable to letters received in the morning, and burnt by the despairing victim before his untimely and violent departure from life.

The office of the paper was situated at the top of a building in Fleet Street; one back room comprised the whole of its editorial space, and one dour man its entire staff. It was his duty to receive the correspondence as it came and to convey it to the cloakroom of a London station. An hour later it would be called for by a messenger and transferred to another cloakroom. Eventually it would arrive in the possession of the man who was responsible for the contents of the paper. Many of these letters contained contributions in the ordinary way of business, a story or two contributed by a more or less well-known writer. Fallock, or Farrington, needed these outside contributions, not only to give the newspaper a verisimilitude of genuineness, but also to fill the columns of the journal.

He himself devoted his energies to two pages of shrewdly edited tit-bits of information about the great. They were carefully written, often devoid of any reference to the person whom they affected, and were more or less innocuous. But in every batch of letters there were always one or two which gave the master blackmailer an opportunity for extracting money from people, who had been betrayed by servants or friends. There was a standing offer in the *Gossip* of five guineas for any paragraph which might be useful to the editor, and it is a commentary upon the morality of human nature that there were times when Farrington paid out nearly a thousand pounds a week for the information which his unscrupulous contributors gave him.

There was work here for Poltavo; he was an accomplished scholar, and a shrewd man of affairs. If Farrington had been forced to accept his service, having accepted them, he could do no less than admit the wisdom of his choice. In his big study, with the door locked, Poltavo carefully sorted the correspondence, thinking the while.

If he played his cards well he knew his future was assured. The consequence of his present employment, the misery it might bring to the innocent and to the foolishly guilty alike, did not greatly trouble him; he was perfectly satisfied with his own position in the matter. He had found a means of livelihood, which offered enormous rewards and the minimum of risk. In his brief stay at the Secret House, Farrington had impressed upon him the necessity for respecting trifles.

"If you can make five shillings out of a working man," was his dictum, "make it. We cannot afford to despise the smallest amount," and in consequence Poltavo was paying as much attention to the ill-written and illiterate scrawls which came from the East End of London, as he was to the equally illiterate efforts of the under-butler, describing an error of his master's in a northern ducal seat. Poltavo went through the letters systematically, putting this epistle to the right, and that to the left; this to make food for the newspaper; that, as a subject for further operations. Presently he stopped and looked up at the ceiling.

"So she must marry Frank Doughton within a week," he said to himself in wonder.

Yes, Farrington had insisted upon carrying out his plans, knowing the power he held, and he, Poltavo, had accepted the ultimatum in all meekness of spirit.

"I must be losing my nerve," he muttered. "Married in a week! Am I to give her up, this gracious, beautiful girl—with her future, or without her fortune?"

He smiled, and it was not a pleasant smile to see. "No, my friend, I think you have gone a little too far. You depended too much upon my acquiescence. Ernesto, *mon ami*, you have to do some quick thinking between now and next Monday."

A telephone buzzed at his elbow, and he took it off and listened.

"Yes?" he asked, and then he recognized the speaker's voice, and his voice went soft and caressing, for it was the voice of Doris Gray that he heard.

"Can you see me to-morrow?" she asked.

"I can see you to-day, my lady, at once, if you wish it," he said, lightly.

There was a little hesitation at the other end of the wire.

"If you could, I should feel glad," she said. "I am rather troubled."

"Not seriously, I hope?" he asked, anxiously.

"I have had a letter from some one," she said, meaningly.

"I think I understand," he replied; "some one wishes you to do a thing which is a repugnant to you."

"I cannot say that," she said, and there was despair in her voice; "all I know is that I am bewildered by the turn events have taken. Do you know the contents of the letter?"

"I know," he said, gently; "it was my misfortune to be the bearer of the communication."

"What do you think?" she asked, after a while.

"You know what I think," he said, passionately. "Can you expect me to agree to this?"

The intensity of his voice frightened her, and she rapidly strove to bring him down to a condition of normality.

"Come to-morrow," she said, hastily. "I would like to talk it over with you."

"I will come at once," he said.

"Perhaps you had better not," she hesitated.

"I am coming at once," he said, firmly, and hung up the receiver.

In that moment of resentment against the tyranny of his employer, he forgot all the dangers which the Secret House threatened; all its swift and wicked vengeance. He only knew, with the instinct of a beast of prey who saw its quarry stolen under its very eyes, the loss which this man was inflicting upon him. Five minutes later he was in Brakely Square with the girl. She was pale and worried; there were dark circles round her eyes which spoke eloquently of a sleepless night.

"I do not know what to do," she said. "I am very fond of Frank. I can speak to you, can I not, Count Poltavo?"

"You may confide in me absolutely," he said, gravely.

"And yet I am not so fond of him," she went on, "that I can marry him yet."

"Then why do you?" he asked.

"How can I disobey this?" She held the letter out.

He took it from her hand with a little smile, walked to the fireplace and dropped it gently upon the glowing coals.

"I am afraid you are not carrying out instructions," he said, playfully.

There was something in this action which chilled her; he was thinking more of his safety and his duty to Farrington than he was of her, she thought: a curiously inconsistent view to take in all the circumstances, but it was one which had an effect upon her after actions.

"Now listen to me," he said, with his kindly smile; "you have not to trouble about this; you are to go your own way and allow me to make it right with Farrington. He is a very headstrong and ambitious man, and there is some reason perhaps why he should want you to marry Doughton, but as to that I will gain a little more information. In the meantime you are to dismiss the matter from your mind, leaving everything to me."

She shook her head.

"I am afraid I cannot do that," she said. "Unless I have a letter from my guardian expressing wishes to the contrary, I must carry out his desires. It

is dreadful—dreadful,"—she wrung her hands piteously,—"that I should be placed in this wretched position. How can I help him by marrying Frank Doughton? How can I save him—can you tell me?"

He shook his head.

"Have you communicated with Mr. Doughton?"

She nodded.

"I sent him a letter," she hesitated. "I have kept a draft of it; would you like to see it?"

A little shade of bitter anger swept across his face, but with an effort he mastered himself.

"I should," he said, evenly.

She handed the sheet of paper to him.

"DEAR FRANK," it ran, "for some reason which I cannot explain to you, it is necessary that the marriage which my uncle desired should take place within the next week. You know my feelings towards you; that I do not love you, and that if it were left to my own wishes this marriage would not take place, but for a reason which I cannot at the moment give you I must act contrary to my own wishes. This is not a gracious nor an easy thing to say to you, but I know you well enough, with your large, generous heart and your kindly nature, to realize that you will understand something of the turmoil of feelings which at present dominate my heart."

Poltavo finished reading, and put the letter back on the table; he walked up and down the room without saying a word, then he turned on her suddenly.

"Madonna!" he said, in the liquid Southern accents of his—he had spent his early life in Italy and the address came naturally to him—"if Frank Doughton were I, would you hesitate?"

A look of alarm came into the girl's eyes; he saw then his mistake. He had confounded her response to his sympathy with a deeper feeling which she did not possess. In that one glimpse he saw more than she knew herself,

that of the two Frank was the preferable. He raised his hand and arrested her stammering speech.

"There is no need to tell me," he smiled; "perhaps some day you will realize that the love Count Poltavo offered you was the greatest compliment that has ever been paid to you, for you have inspired the one passion of my life which is without baseness and without ulterior motives."

He said this in a tremulous voice, and possibly he believed it. He had said as much before to women whom he had long since forgotten, but who carried the memory of his wicked face to their graves.

"Now," he said, briskly, "we must wait for Mr. Doughton's answer."

"He has already answered," she said; "he telephoned me."

He smiled.

"How typically English, almost American, in his hustle; and when is the happy event to take place?" he bantered.

"Oh, please, don't, don't,"—she raised her hands and covered her face,—"I hardly know that, even now, I have the strength to carry out my uncle's wishes."

"But when?" he asked, more soberly.

"In three days. Frank is getting a special licence; we are——" She hesitated, and he waited.

"We are going to Paris," she said, with a pink flush in her face, "but Frank wishes that we shall live"—she stopped again, and then went on almost defiantly—"that we shall live apart, although we shall not be able to preserve that fact a secret."

He nodded.

"I understand," he said; "therein Mr. Doughton shows an innate delicacy, which I greatly appreciate."

Again that little sense of resentment swept through her; the patronage in his tone, the indefinable suggestion of possession was, she thought, uncalled for. That he should approve of Frank in that possessive manner was not far removed from an impertinence.

"Have you thought?" he asked, after a while, "what would happen if you did not marry Frank Doughton in accordance with your uncle's wishes—what terrible calamity would fall upon your uncle?"

She shook her head.

"I do not know," she said, frankly. "I am only beginning to get a dim idea of Mr. Farrington's real character. I always thought he was a kindly and considerate man; now I know him to be——" She stopped, and Poltavo supplied her deficiency of speech.

"You know him to be a criminal," he smiled, "a man who has for years been playing upon the fears and the credulity of his fellow-creatures. That must have been a shocking discovery, Miss Gray, but at least you will acquit him of having stolen your fortune."

"It is all very terrible," she said; "somehow every day brings it to me. My aunt, Lady Dinsmore, was right."

"Lady Dinsmore is always right," he said, lightly; "it is one of the privileges of her age and position. But in what respect was she right?"

The girl shook her head.

"I do not think it is loyal of me to tell you, but I must. She always thought Mr. Farrington was engaged in some shady business and has warned me time after time."

"An admirable woman," said Poltavo, with a sneer.

"In three days," he went on, thoughtfully. "Well, much may happen in three days. I must confess that I am anxious to know what would be the result of this marriage not taking place."

He did not wait for an expression of her views, but with a curt little bow he ushered himself out of the room.

"Three days," he found himself repeating, as he made his way back to his house. "Why should Farrington be in such a frantic hurry to marry the girl off, and why should he have chosen this penniless reporter?"

This was a matter which required a great deal of examination.

Two of those three days were dream days for Frank Doughton; he could not believe it possible that such a fortune could be his. But with his joy there ran the knowledge that he was marrying a woman who had no desire for such a union.

But she would learn to love him; so he promised himself in his optimism and the assurance of his own love. He had unbounded faith in himself, and was working hard in these days, not only upon his stories, but upon the clue which the discovery of the belated letter afforded him. He had carefully gone through the parish list to discover the Annies of the past fifty years. In this he was somewhat handicapped by the fact that there must have been hundreds of Annies who enjoyed no separate existence, married women who had no property qualification to appear on ratepayers' lists; anonymous Annies, who perhaps employed that as a pet name, instead of the name with which they had been christened.

He had one or two clues and was following these industriously. For the moment, however, he must drop this work and concentrate his mind upon the tremendous and remarkable business which his coming marriage involved. He had a series of articles to write for the *Monitor*, and he applied himself feverishly to this work.

It was two nights before his marriage that he carried the last of his work to the great newspaper office on the Thames Embankment, and delivered his manuscript in person to the editor.

That smiling man offered his congratulations to the embarrassed youth.

"I suppose we shall not be looking for any articles from you for quite a long time," he said, at parting.

"I hope so," said the other. "I do not see why I should starve because I am married. My wife will be a very rich woman," he said quietly, "but so far as I am concerned that will make no difference; I do not intend taking one penny of her fortune."

The journalist clapped him on the shoulder.

"Good lad," he said, approvingly; "the man who lives on his wife's income is a man who has ceased to live."

"That sounds like an epigram," smiled Frank.

He looked at his watch as he descended the stairs. It was nine o'clock and he had not dined; he would go up to an eating house in Soho and have his frugal meal before he retired for the night. He had had a heavy day, and a heavier day threatened on the morrow. Outside the newspaper office was a handsome new car, its lacquer work shining in the electric light. Frank was passing when the chauffeur called him.

"Excuse me, sir," he said, touching his cap, "are you Mr. Frank Doughton?"

"That is my name," said Frank, in surprise, for he did not recognize the man.

"I have been asked to call and pick you up, sir."

"Pick me up?" asked the astonished Frank—"by whom?"

"By Sir George Frederick," said the man, respectfully.

Frank knew the name of the member of Parliament and puzzled his brain as to whether he had ever met him.

"But what does Sir George want with me?" he asked.

"He wanted five minutes' conversation with you, sir," said the man.

It would have been churlish to have refused the member's request; besides, the errand would take him partly on his way. He opened the door of the landaulet and stepped in, and as the door swung to behind him, he found he was not alone in the car.

"What is the——" he began, when a powerful hand gripped his throat, and he was swung backward on the padded seat as the car moved slowly forward and, gathering speed as it went, flew along the Thames Embankment with its prisoner.

CHAPTER XV

In the rectory at Great Bradley, Lady Constance Dex arose from a sleepless night to confront her placid brother at the breakfast table. The Reverend Jeremiah Bangley, a stout and easy man, who spent as much of his time in London as in his rectory, was frankly nonplussed by the apparition. He was one of those men, common enough, who accept the most extraordinary happenings as being part of life's normal round. An earthquake in Little Bradley which swallowed up his church and the major portion of his congregation would not have interested him any more than the budding of the trees, or a sudden arrival of flower life in his big walled garden. Now, however, he was obviously astonished.

"What brings you to breakfast, Constance?" he asked. "I have not seen you at this table for many years."

"I could not sleep," she said, as she helped herself at the sideboard to a crisp morsel of bacon. "I think I will take my writing pad to Moor Cottage."

He pursed his lips, this easy going rector of Little Bradley.

"I have always thought," he said, "that Moor Cottage was not the most desirable gift the late Mr. Farrington could have made to you." He paused, to allow her a rejoinder, but as she made no reply, he went on: "It is isolated, standing on the edge of the moor, away from the ordinary track of people. I am always scared, my dear Constance, that one of these days you will have some wretched tramp, or a person of the criminal classes, causing you a great deal of distress and no little inconvenience."

There was much of truth in what he said. Moor Cottage, a pretty little one-storied dwelling, had been built by the owner of the Secret House at the same time that the house itself had been erected. It was intended, so the builder said, to serve the purpose of a summer house, and certainly it offered seclusion, for it was placed on the edge of the moor, approached by

a by-road which was scarcely ever traversed, since Bradley mines had been worked out and abandoned.

Many years ago when the earth beneath the moor had been tunnelled left and right by the seekers after tin and lead, Moor Cottage might have stood in the centre of a hive of industry. The ramshackle remains of the miners' cottage were to be seen on the other side of the hill; the broken and deserted headgear of the pit, and the discoloured chimney of the old power house were still visible a quarter of a mile from the cottage.

It suited the owner of the Secret House, however, to have this little cottage erected, though it was nearly two miles from the Secret House, and he had spared neither expense nor trouble in preparing a handsome interior.

Lady Constance Dex had been the recipient of many gifts from Mr. Farrington and his friends. There had been a period when Farrington could not do enough for her, and had showered upon her every mark of his esteem, and Moor Cottage had perhaps been the most magnificent of these presents. Here she could find seclusion, and in the pretty oak-panelled rooms reconstruct those happy days which Great Bradley had at one time offered to her.

"It is a little lonely," she smiled at her brother.

She had a good-natured contempt for his opinion. He was a large, lethargic man, who had commonplace views on all subjects.

"But really you know, Jerry, I am quite a capable person, and Brown will be near by, in case of necessity."

He nodded, and addressed himself again to the *Times*, the perusal of which she had interrupted.

"I have nothing more to say," he said from behind his newspaper. By and by he put it down.

"Who is this Mr. Smith?" he asked, suddenly.

"Mr. Smith?" she said, with interest. "Which Mr. Smith are you referring to?"

"I think he is a detective person," said the Reverend Jeremiah Bangley; "he has honoured us with a great number of visits lately."

"You mean——?"

"I mean Great Bradley," he explained. "Do you think there is anything wrong at the Secret House?"

"What could there be wrong," she asked, "that has not been wrong for the last ten or twenty years?"

He shrugged his massive shoulders.

"I have never quite approved of the Secret House," he said, unnecessarily.

She finished her hurried breakfast and rose.

"You have never approved of anything, Jerry," she said, tapping him on the shoulder as she passed.

She looked through the window; the victoria she had ordered was waiting at the door, with the imperturbable Brown sitting on the box.

"I shall be back to lunch," she said.

Looking through a window he saw her mount into the carriage carrying a portfolio. In that letter case, although he did not know it, were the letters and diaries which Dr. Goldworthy had brought from the Congo. In the seclusion of Moor Cottage she found the atmosphere to understand the words, written now in fire upon her very soul, and to plan her future.

There was no servant at Moor Cottage. She was in the habit of sending one of her own domestic staff after her visit to make it tidy for her future reception.

She let herself in through the little door placed under the green-covered porch.

"You can unharness the horse; I shall be here two hours," she said to the waiting Brown.

The man touched his hat. He was used to these excursions and was possessed of the patience of his class. He backed the victoria on to the moor by the side of the fence which surrounded the house. There was a little stable at the back, but it was never used. He unharnessed the horse, fixed his nosebag, and sat down to read his favourite newspaper; a little journal which dealt familiarly with the erratic conduct of the upper classes. He was not a quick reader, and there was sufficient in the gossipy journal to occupy his attention for three or four hours. At the end of an hour he thought he heard his lady's voice calling him, and jumping up, he walked to the door of the cottage.

He listened, but there was no other sound, and he came back to his previous position, and continued his study of the decadent aristocracy. Four hours he waited, and assailed by a most human hunger, his patience was pardonably exhausted.

He rose slowly, harnessed the horse, and drove the victoria ostentatiously before the window of the little sitting-room which Lady Constance Dex used as a study. Another half an hour passed without any response, and he got down from his box and knocked at the door.

There was no answer; he knocked again; still no reply.

In alarm he went to the window and peered in. The floor was strewn with papers scattered in confusion. A chair had been overturned. More to the point, he saw an overturned inkpot, which was eloquent to his ordered mind of an unusual happening.

Increasingly alarmed, he put his shoulder to the door, but it did not yield. He tried the window; it was locked.

It was at that moment that a motor came swiftly over the hill from the direction of the rectory. With a jar it came to a sudden stop before the house, and T. B. Smith leapt out.

Brown had seen the detective before on his visits to the rectory, and now hailed him as veritably god-sent.

"Where is Lady Constance?" asked T. B., quickly.

The man pointed to the house with trembling finger.

"She's in there somewhere," he said, fretfully, "but I can't make her answer ... and the room appears to be very disordered."

He led the way to the window. T. B. looked in and saw that which confirmed his worst fears.

"Stand back," he said.

He raised his ebony stick and sent it smashing through the glass. In a second his hand was inside unlocking the latch of the window; a few seconds later he was in the room itself. He passed swiftly from room to room, but there was no sign of Lady Constance. On the floor of the study was a piece of lace collar, evidently wrenched from her gown.

"Hullo!" said Ela, who had followed him. He pointed to the table. On a sheet of paper was the print of a bloody palm.

"Farrington," said T. B., briefly, "he has been here; but how did he get out?"

He questioned the coachman closely, but the man was emphatic.

"No, sir," he said, "it would have been impossible for anybody to have passed out of here without my seeing them. Not only could I see the cottage from where I sat, but the whole of the hillside."

"Is there any other place where she could be?"

"There is the outhouse," said Brown, after a moment's thought; "we used to put up the victoria there, but we never use it nowadays in fine weather."

The outhouse consisted of a large coachhouse and a small stable. There was no lock to the doors, T. B. noticed, and he pulled them open wide. There was a heap of straw in one corner, kept evidently as a provision against the need of the visiting coachman. T. B. stepped into the outhouse, then suddenly with a cry he leant down, and caught a figure by the collar and swung him to his feet.

"Will you kindly explain what you are doing here?" he asked, and then gave a gasp of astonishment, for the sleepy-eyed prisoner in his hands was Frank Doughton.

"It is a curious story you tell me," said T. B.

"I admit it is curious," said Frank, with a smile, "and I am so sleepy that I do not know how much I have told you, and how much I have imagined."

"You told me," recapitulated T. B., "that you were kidnapped last night in London, that you were carried through London and into the country in an unknown direction, and that you made your escape from the motor-car by springing out in the early hours of this morning, whilst the car was going at a slackened speed."

"That is it," said the other. "I have not the slightest idea where I am; perhaps you can tell me?"

"You are near Great Bradley," said T. B., with a smile. "I wonder you do not recognize your home; for home it is, as I understand."

Frank looked round with astonished eyes.

"What were they bringing me here for?" he demanded.

"That remains to be discovered," replied T. B.; "my own impression is that you——"

"Do you think I was being taken to the Secret House?" interrupted the young man, suddenly.

T. B. shook his head.

"I should think that was unlikely. I suspect our friend Poltavo of having carried out this little coup entirely on his own. I further suspect his having brought the car in this direction with no other object than to throw suspicion upon our worthy friends across the hill—and how did you come to the outhouse?"

"I was dead beat," explained Frank. "I had a sudden spasm of strength which enabled me to out-distance those people who were pursuing me, but after I had shaken them off I felt that I could drop. I came upon this cottage, which seemed the only habitation in view, and after endeavouring to waken the occupants I did the next best thing, I made my way into the coachhouse and fell asleep."

T. B. had no misgivings so far as this story was concerned; he accepted it as adding only another obstacle to the difficulties of his already difficult task.

"You heard no sound whilst you lay there?"

"None whatever," said the young man.

"No sound of a struggle, I mean," said T. B., and then it was that he explained to Frank Doughton the extraordinary disappearance of the owner of Moor Cottage.

"She must be in the house," said Frank.

They went back and resumed their search. Upstairs was a bedroom, and adjoining a bath-room. On the ground floor were two rooms: the study he had quitted and a smaller room beautifully decorated and containing a piano. But the search was fruitless; Lady Constance Dex had disappeared as though the earth had opened and swallowed her up. There was no sign of a trap in the whole of the little building, and T. B. was baffled.

"It is a scientific axiom," he said, addressing Ela with a thoughtful glint in his eye, "that matter must occupy space, therefore Lady Constance Dex must be in existence, she cannot have evaporated into thin air, and I am not going to leave this place until I find her."

Ela was thinking deeply, and frowning at the untidiness of the table.

"Do you remember that locket which you found on one of the dead men in Brakely Square?" he asked suddenly.

T. B. nodded. He put his hand in his waistcoat pocket, for he had carried that locket ever since the night of its discovery.

"Let us have a look at the inscription again," said Ela.

They drew up chairs to the table and examined the little circular label which they had found in the battered interior.

"Mor: Cot.
God sav the Keng."

Ela shook his head helplessly.

"I am perfectly sure there is a solution here," he said. "Do you see those words on the top? 'Mor: Cot.'—that stands for Moor Cottage."

"By Jove, so it does," said T. B., picking up the locket; "that never struck me before. It was the secret of Moor Cottage which this man discovered, and with which he was trying to blackmail our friend. So far as the patriotic postscript is concerned that is beyond my understanding."

"There is a meaning to it," said Ela, "and it is not a cryptogram either. You see how he has forgotten to put the 'e' in 'save'? And he has spelt 'king' 'keng.'"

They waited before the house whilst Brown drove to the rectory, and then on to the town. Jeremiah Bangley arrived in a state of calm anticipation. That his sister had disappeared did not seem to strike him as a matter for surprise, though he permitted himself to say that it was a very remarkable occurrence.

"I have always warned Constance not to be here alone, and I should never have forgiven myself if Brown had not been on the spot," he said.

"Can you offer any explanation?"

The rector shook his head. He was totally ignorant of the arrangements of the house, had never, so he said, put foot in it in his life. This was perfectly true, for he was an incurious man who did not greatly bother himself about the affairs of other people. The local police arrived in half an hour, headed by the chief inspector, who happened to be in the station when the report was brought in.

"I suppose I had better take this young man to the station?" he said, indicating Frank.

"Why?" asked T. B. calmly; "what do you gain by arresting him? As a matter of fact there is no evidence whatever which would implicate Mr. Doughton, and I am quite prepared to give you my own guarantee to produce him whenever you may require him.

"The best thing you can do is to get back to town," he said kindly to that young man; "you need a little sleep. It is not a pleasant prelude to your marriage. By the way, that is to-morrow, is it not?" he asked, suddenly.

Frank nodded.

"I wonder if that has anything to do with your kidnapping," said T. B. thoughtfully. "Is there any person who is anxious that this marriage should not come about?"

Frank hesitated.

"I hardly like to accuse a man," he said, "but Poltavo——"

"Poltavo?" repeated T. B. quickly.

"Yes," said Frank; "he has some views on the question of Miss Gray."

He spoke reluctantly, for he was loath to introduce Doris' name into the argument.

"Poltavo would have a good reason," mused T. B. Smith. "Tell me what happened in the car."

Briefly Frank related the circumstances which had led up to his capture.

"When I found myself in their hands," he said, "I decided to play 'possum for a while. The car was moving at incredible speed, remembering your stringent traffic regulations,"—he smiled,—"and I knew that any attempt to escape on my part would result in serious injury to myself. They made no bones about their intentions. Before we were clear of London they had pulled the blinds, and one of them had switched on the electric lamp. They were both masked, and were, I think, foreigners. One sat opposite to me,

all through the night, a revolver on his knees, and he did not make any disguise of his intention of employing his weapon if I gave the slightest trouble.

"I could not tell, because of the lowered blinds, which direction we were taking, but presently we struck the country and they let down one of the windows without raising the blind and I could smell the sweet scent of the fields, and knew we were miles away from London.

"I think I must have dozed a little, for very suddenly, it seemed, daylight came, and I had the good sense in waking to make as little stir as possible. I found the man sitting opposite was also in a mild doze, and the other at my side was nodding.

"I took a very careful survey of the situation. The car was moving very slowly, and evidently the driver had orders to move at no particular pace through the night, in order to economize the petrol. There was an inside handle to each of the doors, and I had to make up my mind by which I was to make my escape. I decided upon the near side. Gathering up my energies for one supreme effort, I suddenly leapt up, flung open the door, and jumped out. I had enough experience of the London traffic to clear the car without stumbling.

"I found myself upon a heath, innocent of any cover, save for a belt of trees about half a mile ahead of me as I ran. Fortunately the down, which was apparently flat, was, in fact, of a rolling character, and in two minutes I must have been out of sight of the car—long before they had brought the driver, himself half asleep probably, to an understanding that I had made my escape. They caught sight of me as I came up from the hollow, and one of them must have fired at me, for I heard the whistle of a bullet pass my head. That is all the story I have to tell. It was rather a tame conclusion to what promised to be a most sensational adventure."

At the invitation of the Reverend Jeremiah he drove back to the rectory, and left T. B. to continue his search for the missing Lady Constance. No better result attended the second scrutiny of the rooms than had resulted from the first.

"The only suggestion I can make now," said T. B., helplessly, "is that whilst our friend the coachman was reading, his lady slipped out without attracting his attention and strolled away; she will in all probability be awaiting us at the rectory."

Yet in his heart he knew that this view was absolutely wrong. The locked doors, the evidence of a struggle in the room, the bloody hand print, all pointed conclusively to foul play.

"At any rate Lady Constance Dex is somewhere within the radius of four miles," he said, grimly, "and I will find her if I have to pull down the Secret House stone by stone."

CHAPTER XVI

The morning of Doris Gray's wedding dawned fair and bright, and she sat by the window which overlooked the gardens in Brakely Square, her hands clasped across her knees, her mind in a very tangle of confusion. It was happy for her (she argued) that there were so many considerations attached to this wedding that she had not an opportunity of thinking out, logically and to its proper end, the consequence of this act of hers.

She had had a wire from Frank on the night previous, and to her surprise it had been dated from Great Bradley. For some reason which she could not define she was annoyed that he could leave London, and be so absorbed in his work on the eve of his wedding. She gathered that his presence in that town had to do with his investigations in the Tollington case. She thought that at least he might have spent one day near her in case she wished to consult him. He took much for granted, she thought petulantly. Poltavo, on the contrary, had been most assiduous in his attention. He had had tea with her the previous afternoon, and with singular delicacy had avoided any reference to the forthcoming marriage or to his own views on the subject. But all that he did not speak, he looked. He conveyed the misery in which he stood with subtle suggestion. She felt sorry for him, had no doubt of the genuineness of his affection, or his disinterestedness. A profitable day for Poltavo in ordinary circumstances.

A maid brought her from her reverie to the practical realities of life.

"Mr. Debenham has called, miss," said the girl. "I have shown him into the drawing-room."

"Mr. Debenham?" repeated Doris, with a puzzled frown. "Oh, yes, the lawyer; I will come down to him."

She found the staid solicitor walking up and down the drawing-room abstractedly.

"I suppose you know that I shall be a necessary guest at your wedding," he said, as he shook hands. "I have to deliver to you the keys of your uncle's safe at the London Safe Deposit. I have a memorandum here of the exact amount of money which should be in that safe."

He laid the paper on the table.

"You can look at the items at your leisure, but roughly it amounts to eight hundred thousand pounds, which was left you by your late father, who, I understand, died when you were a child."

She nodded.

"That sum is in gilt-edged securities, and you will probably find that a number of dividends are due to you. The late Mr. Farrington, when he made his arrangements for your future, chose this somewhat unusual and bizarre method of protecting your money, much against my will. I might tell you," he went on, "that he consulted me about six years ago on the subject, and I strongly advised him against it. As it happened, I was wrong, for immediately afterwards, as his books show, he must have suffered enormous losses, and although I make no suggestion against his character,"—he raised his hand deprecatingly,—"yet I do say that the situation which was created by the slump in Canadian Pacifics of which he was a large holder, might very easily have tempted a man not so strong-willed as Mr. Farrington. At the present moment," he went on, "I have no more to do than discharge my duty, and I have called beforehand to see you and to ask whether your uncle spoke of the great Tollington fortune of which he was one of the trustees, though as I believe—as I know, in fact—he never handled the money."

She looked surprised.

"It is curious that you should ask that," she said. "Mr. Doughton is engaged in searching for the heir to that fortune."

Debenham nodded.

"So I understand," he said. "I ask because I received a communication from the other trustees in America, and I am afraid your future husband's

search will be unavailing unless he can produce the heir within the next forty-eight hours."

"Why is that?" she asked in surprise.

"The terms of the will are peculiar," said Mr. Debenham, walking up and down as he spoke. "The Tollington fortune, as you may know——"

"I know nothing about it," she interrupted.

"Then I will tell you." He smiled. "The fortune descends to the heir and to his wife in equal proportions."

"Suppose he is not blessed with a wife?" She smiled with something like her old gaiety.

"In that case the money automatically goes to the woman the heir eventually marries. But the terms of the will are that the heir shall be discovered within twenty years of the date of Tollington's death. The time of grace expires to-morrow."

"Poor Frank," she said, shaking her head, "and he is working so hard with his clues! I suppose if he does not produce that mysterious individual by to-morrow there will be no reward for him?"

The lawyer shook his head.

"I should hardly think it likely," he said, "because the reward is for the man who complies with the conditions of the will within a stipulated time. It was because I knew Mr. Doughton had some interest in it, and because also"—he hesitated—"I thought that your uncle might have taken you into his confidence."

"That he might have told me who this missing person was, and that he himself knew; and for some reason suppressed the fact?" she asked, quickly. "Is that what you suggest, Mr. Debenham?"

"Please do not be angry with me," said the lawyer, quickly; "I do not wish to say anything against Mr. Farrington; but I know he was a very shrewd and calculating man, and I thought possibly that he might have taken you

that much into his confidence, and that you might be able to help your future husband a part of the way to a very large sum of money."

She shook her head again.

"I have absolutely no knowledge of the subject. My uncle never took me into his confidence," she said; "he was very uncommunicative where business was concerned—although I am sure he was fond of me." Her eyes filled with tears, not at the recollection of his kindness, but at the humiliation she experienced at playing a part in which she had no heart. It made her feel inexpressibly mean and small.

"That is all," said Mr. Debenham. "I shall see you at the registrar's office."

She nodded.

"May I express the hope," he said, in his heavy manner, "that your life will be a very happy one, and that your marriage will prove all you hope it will be?"

"I hardly know what I hope it will be," she said wearily, as she accompanied him to the door.

That good man shook his head sadly as he made his way back to his office.

Was there ever so unromantic and prosaic affair as this marriage, thought Doris, as she stepped into the taxicab which was to convey her to the registrar's office? She had had her dreams, as other girls had had, of that wonderful day when with pealing of the organ she would walk up the aisle perhaps upon the arm of Gregory Farrington, to a marriage which would bring nothing but delight and happiness. And here was the end of her dreams, a great heiress and a beautiful girl rocking across London in a hired cab to a furtive marriage.

Frank was waiting for her on the pavement outside the grimy little office. Mr. Debenham was there, and a clerk he had brought with him as witness. The ceremony was brief and uninteresting; she became Mrs. Doughton before she quite realized what was happening.

"There is only one thing to do now," said the lawyer as they stood outside again on the sunlit pavement.

He looked at his watch.

"We had best go straight away to the London Safe Deposit, and, if you will give me the authority, I will take formal possession of your fortune and place it in the hands of my bankers. I think these things had better be done regularly."

The girl acquiesced.

Frank was singularly silent during the drive; save to make some comment upon the amount of traffic in the streets, he did not speak to her and she was grateful for his forbearance. Her mind was in a turmoil; she was married—that was all she knew—married to somebody she liked but did not love. Married to a man who had been chosen for her partly against her will. She glanced at him out of the corners of her eyes; if she was joyless, no less was he. It was an inauspicious beginning to a married life which would end who knew how? Before the depressing granite façade of the London Safe Deposit the party descended, Mr. Debenham paid the cabman, and they went down the stone steps into the vaults of the repository.

There was a brief check whilst Mr. Debenham explained his authority for the visit, and it was when the officials were making reference to their books that the party was augmented by the arrival of Poltavo.

He bowed over the girl's hand, holding it a little longer than Frank could have liked, murmured colourless congratulations and nodded to Debenham.

"Count Poltavo is here, I may say," explained the lawyer, "by your late uncle's wishes. They were contained in a letter he wrote to me a few days before he disappeared."

Frank nodded grudgingly; still he was generous enough to realize something of this man's feelings if he loved Doris, and he made an especial effort to be gracious to the new-comer.

A uniformed attendant led them through innumerable corridors till they came to a private vault guarded by stout bars. The attendant opened these

and they walked into a little stone chamber, illuminated by overhead lights.

The only article of furniture in the room was a small safe which stood in one corner. A very small safe indeed, thought Frank, to contain so large a fortune. The lawyer turned the key in the lock methodically, and the steel door swung back. The back of Mr. Debenham obscured their view of the safe's interior. Then he turned with an expression of wonder.

"There is nothing here," he said.

"Nothing!" gasped Doris.

"Save this," said the lawyer.

He took a small envelope and handed it to the girl. She opened it mechanically and read:

"I have, unfortunately, found it necessary to utilize your fortune for the furtherance of my plans. You must try and forgive me for this; but I have given you a greater one than you have lost, a husband."

She looked up.

"What does this mean?" she whispered.

Frank took the letter from her hand and concluded the reading.

"A husband in Frank Doughton...."

The words swam before his eyes.

"And Frank Doughton is the heir to the Tollington millions, as his father was before him. All the necessary proofs to establish his identity will be discovered in the sealed envelope which the lawyer holds, and which is inscribed 'C.'"

The letter was signed "Gregory Farrington."

The lawyer was the first to recover his self-possession; his practical mind went straight to the business at hand.

"There is such an envelope in my office," he said, "given to me by Mr. Farrington with strict instructions that it was not to be handed to his executors or to any person until definite instructions arrived—instructions which would be accompanied by unmistakable proof as to the necessity for its being handed over. I congratulate you, Mr. Doughton."

He turned and shook hands with the bewildered Frank, who had been listening like a man in a dream; the heir to the Tollington millions; he, the son of George Doughton, and all the time he had been looking for—what? For his own grandmother!

It came on him all of a rush. He knew now that all his efforts, all his search might have been saved, if he had only realized the Christian name of his father's mother.

He had only the dimmest recollection of the placid-faced lady who had died whilst he was at school; he had never associated in his mind this serene old lady, who had passed away only a few hours before her beloved husband, with the Annie for whom he had searched. It made him gasp—then he came to earth quickly as he realized that his success had come with the knowledge of his wife's financial ruin. He looked at her as she stood there—it was too vast a shock for her to realize at once.

He put his arm about her shoulder, and Poltavo, twirling his little moustache, looked at the two through his lowered lids with an ugly smile playing at the corner of his mouth.

"It is all right, dear," said Frank soothingly; "your money is secure—it was only a temporary use he made of it."

"It is not that," she said, with a catch in her throat; "it is the feeling that my uncle trapped you into this marriage. I did not mind his dissipating my own fortune; the money is nothing to me. But he has caught you by a trick, and he has used me as a bait." She covered her face with her hands.

In a few moments she had composed herself; she spoke no other word, but suffered herself to be led out of the building into the waiting cab. Poltavo watched them drive off with that fierce little smile of his, and turned to the lawyer.

"A clever man, Mr. Farrington," he said, in a bitter tone of reluctant admiration.

The lawyer looked at him steadily.

"His Majesty's prisons are filled with men who specialize in that kind of cleverness," he said, drily, and left Poltavo without another word.

CHAPTER XVII

T. B. Smith was playing a round of golf at Walton Heath, when the news was telephoned through to him.

He left immediately for town, and picked up Ela at luncheon at the Fritz Hotel, where the detective had his headquarters.

"The whole thing is perfectly clear, now," he said. "The inexplicable disappearance of Mr. Farrington is explained in poster type, 'that he who runs may read.'"

"I am a little hazy about the solution myself," said Ela dubiously.

"Then I will put it in plain language for you," said T. B. as he speared a sardine from the *hors d'œuvre* dish. "Farrington knew all along that the heir to the Tollington millions was George Doughton. He knew it years and years ago, and it was for that reason he settled at Great Bradley, where the Doughtons had their home. Evidently the two older Doughtons were dead at this time, and only George Doughton, the romantic and altogether unpractical explorer, represented the family.

"George was in love with the lady who is now known as Lady Constance Dex, and knowing this, Farrington evidently took every step that was possible to ingratiate himself into her good graces. He knew that the fortune would descend equally to Doughton and to his wife. Doughton was a widower and had a son, a youngster at the time, and it is very possible that, the boy being at school, and being very rarely in Great Bradley, Farrington had no idea of his existence.

"The knowledge that this boy was alive must have changed all his plans; at any rate, the engagement was allowed to drift on, whilst he matured some scheme whereby he could obtain a large portion of the Tollington millions for his own use. Again I think his plans must have been changed.

"It was whilst he was at Great Bradley that he was entrusted with the guardianship of Doris Gray, and as his affection for the young girl grew—

an affection which I think was one of the few wholesome things in his life—he must have seen the extraordinary chance which fate had placed in his way.

"With diabolical ingenuity and with a remorselessness which is reminiscent of the Borgias he planned first George Doughton's death, and then the bringing together of Doughton's son and his own ward. There is every proof of this to be found in his subsequent actions. He was prepared to introduce the young people to one another, and by affording them opportunities for meeting, and such encouragement as he could give, to bring about the result he so desired.

"But things did not move fast enough for him, and then he must have learnt, as the other trustees seem to have learnt recently, that there was an undiscovered time limit. He threw out hints to his niece, hints which were received rather coldly. He had taken the bold step of employing Frank Doughton to discover—himself! That was a move which had a twofold purpose. It kept the young man in contact with him. It also satisfied the other trustees, who had entrusted to Farrington the task of employing the necessary measures to discover the missing heir.

"But neither hint nor suggestion served him. The girl's fortune was due for delivery to her care, and his guardianship expired almost at the same time as the time limit for discovery of the Tollington millionaire came to an end. He had to take a desperate step; there were other reasons, of course, contributing to his move.

"The knowledge that he was suspected by me, the certainty that Lady Constance Dex would betray him, once she discovered that he had sent her lover to his death, all these were contributing factors, but the main reason for his disappearance was the will that was read after his bogus death.

"In that will he conveyed unchallengeable instructions for the girl to marry Frank Doughton without delay. I suspect that the girl now knows he is alive. Probably, panic-stricken by her tardiness, he has disclosed his hand so far as the alleged death is concerned."

T. B. looked out of the window on to the stream of life which was flowing east and west along Piccadilly; his face was set in a little frown of doubt

and anxiety.

"I can take Farrington to-morrow if I want to," he said after a moment, "but I wish to gather up every string of organization in my hands."

"What of Lady Constance Dex?" asked Ela. "Whilst we are waiting, she is in some little danger."

T. B. shook his head.

"If she is not dead now," he said simply, "she will be spared. If Farrington wished to kill her—for Farrington it was who spirited her away—he could have done so in the house; no one would have been any the wiser as to the murderer. Lady Constance must wait; we must trust to luck before I inspect that underground chamber of which I imagine she is at present an unwilling inmate. I want to crush this blackmailing force," he said, thumping the table with energy; "I want to sweep out of England the whole organization which is working right under the nose of the police and in defiance of all laws; and until I have done that, I shall not sleep soundly in my bed."

"And Poltavo?"

"Poltavo," smiled T. B., "can wait for just a little while."

He paid the bill and the two men passed out of the hotel and crossed Piccadilly. A man who had been lounging along apparently studying the shop windows saw them out of the corner of his eye and followed them carelessly. Another man, no less ostentatiously reading a newspaper, as he walked along the pavement on the opposite side of the thoroughfare, followed close behind.

T. B. and his companion turned into Burlington Arcade and reached Cork Street. Save for one or two pedestrians the street was utterly deserted, and the first of the shadowers quickened his pace. He put his hand in his tail pocket and took out something which glinted in the April sunlight, but before he could raise his hand the fourth man, now on his heels, dropped his newspaper, and flinging one arm around the shadower's neck, and placing his knee in the small of the other's back, wrenched the pistol away with his disengaged hand.

T. B. turned at the sound of the struggle and came back to assist the shadowing detective. The prisoner was a little man, sharp-featured, and obviously a member of one of the great Latin branches of the human race. A tiny black moustache, fierce scowling eyebrows, and liquid brown eyes now blazing with hate, spoke of a Southern origin.

Deftly the three police officers searched and disarmed him; a pair of adjustable handcuffs snapped upon the man's thin wrists, and before the inevitable crowd could gather the prisoner and his custodians were being whirled to Vine Street in a cab.

They placed the man in the steel dock and asked him the usual questions, but he maintained a dogged silence. That his object had been assassination no one could doubt, for in addition to the automatic pistol, which he had obviously intended using at short range, trusting to luck to make his escape, they found a long stiletto in his breast pocket.

More to the point, and of greater interest to T. B., there was a three-line scrawl on a piece of paper in Italian, which, translated, showed that minute instructions had been given to the would-be murderer as to T. B.'s whereabouts.

"Put him in a cell," said T. B. "I think we are going to find things out. If this is not one of Poltavo's hired thugs, I am greatly mistaken."

Whatever he was, the man offered no information which might assist the detective in his search for the truth, but maintained an unbroken silence, and T. B. gave up the task of questioning him in sheer despair.

The next morning at daybreak the prisoner was aroused and told to dress. He was taken out to where a motor car was awaiting him, and a few moments later he was speeding on the way to Dover. Two detective officers placed him on a steamer and accompanied him to Calais. At Calais they took a courteous leave of him, handing him a hundred francs and the information in his own tongue that he had been deported on an order from the Home Secretary, obtained at midnight the previous night.

The prisoner took his departure with some eagerness and spent the greater portion of his hundred francs in addressing a telegram to Poltavo.

T. B. Smith, who knew that telegram would come, was sitting in the Continental instrument room of the General Post Office when it arrived. He was handed a copy of the telegram and read it. Then he smiled.

"Thank you," he said, as he passed it back to the Superintendent of the department, "this may now be transmitted for delivery. I know all I want to know."

Poltavo received the message an hour later, and having read it, cursed his subordinate's indiscretion, for the message was in Italian, plain for everybody to read who understood that language, and its purport easy to understand for anybody who had a knowledge of the facts.

He waited all that day for a visit from the police, and when T. B. arrived in the evening Poltavo was ready with an excuse and an explanation. But neither excuse nor explanation was asked for. T. B.'s questions had to do with something quite different, namely the new Mrs. Doughton and her vanished fortune.

"I was in the confidence of Mr. Farrington," said Poltavo, relieved to find the visit had nothing to do with that which he most dreaded, "but I was amazed to discover that the safe was empty. It was a tremendous tragedy for the poor young lady. She is in Paris now with her husband," he added.

T. B. nodded.

"Perhaps you will give me their address?" he asked.

"With pleasure," said Count Poltavo, reaching for his address book.

"I may be going to Paris myself to-morrow," T. B. went on, "and I will look these young people up. I suppose it is not the correct thing for any one to call upon honeymoon couples, but a police officer has privileges."

There was an exchange of smiles. Poltavo was almost exhilarated that T. B.'s visit had nothing to do with him personally. A respect, which amounted almost to fear, characterized his attitude toward the great Scotland Yard detective. He credited T. B. with qualities which perhaps that admirable man did not possess, but, as a set-off against this, he failed to credit him with a wiliness which was peculiarly T. B.'s chief asset. For

who could imagine that the detective's chief object in calling upon Poltavo that evening was to allay his suspicions and soothe down his fears. Yet T. B. came for no other reason and with no other purpose. It was absolutely necessary that Poltavo should be taken off his guard, for T. B. was planning the coup which was to end for all time the terror under which hundreds of innocent people in England were lying.

After an exchange of commonplace civilities the two men parted,—T. B., as he said, with his hand on the door, to prepare for his Paris trip, and Poltavo to take up what promised to be one of the most interesting cases that the Fallock blackmailers had ever handled.

He waited until he heard the door close after the detective; until he had watched him, from the window, step into his cab and be whirled away, then he unlocked the lower drawer of his desk, touched a spring in the false bottom, and took from a secret recess a small bundle of letters.

Many of the sheets of notepaper which he spread out on the table before him bore the strawberry crest of his grace the Duke of Ambury. The letters were all in the same sprawling handwriting; ill-spelt and blotted, but they were very much to the point. The Duke of Ambury, in his exuberant youth, had contracted a marriage with a lady in Gibraltar. His regiment had been stationed at that fortress when his succession to the dukedom had been a very remote possibility, and the Spanish lady to whom, as the letters showed, he had plighted his troth, and to whom he was eventually married in the name of Wilson (a copy of the marriage certificate was in the drawer), had been a typical Spaniard of singular beauty and fascination, though of no distinguished birth.

Apparently his grace had regretted his hasty alliance, for two years after his succession to the title, he had married the third daughter of the Earl of Westchester without—so far as the evidence in Poltavo's possession showed—having gone through the formality of releasing himself from his previous union.

Here was a magnificent coup, the most splendid that had ever come into the vision of the blackmailers, for the Duke of Ambury was one of the richest men in England, a landlord who owned half London and had estates

in almost every county. If ever there was a victim who was in a position to be handsomely bled, here was one.

The Spanish wife was now dead, but an heir had been born to the Duke of Ambury before the death, and the whole question of succession was affected by the threatened disclosure. All the facts of the case were in Poltavo's possession; they were written in this curiously uneducated hand which filled the pages of the letters now spread upon the table in front of him. The marriage certificate had been supplied, and a copy of the death certificate had also been obligingly extracted by a peccant servant, and matters were now so far advanced that Poltavo had received, through the Agony column of the *Times*, a reply to the demand he had sent to his victim.

That reply had been very favourable; there had been no suggestion of lawyers; no hint of any intervention on the part of the police. Ambury was willing to be bled, willing indeed, so the agony advertisement indicated to Poltavo, to make any financial sacrifice in order to save the honour of his house.

It was only a question of terms now. Poltavo had decided upon fifty thousand pounds. That sum would be sufficient to enable him to clear out of England and to enjoy life as he best loved it, without the necessity for taking any further risks. With Doris Gray removed from his hands, with the approval of society already palling upon him, he thirsted for new fields and new adventures. The fifty thousand seemed now within his grasp. He should, by his agreement with Farrington, hand two-thirds of that sum to his employer, but even the possibility of his doing this never for one moment occurred to him.

Farrington, so he told himself, a man in hiding, powerless and in Poltavo's hands practically, could not strike back at him; the cards were all in favour of the Count. He had already received some ten thousand pounds as a result of his work in London, and he had frantic and ominous letters from Dr. Fall demanding that the "house" share should be forwarded without delay. These demands Poltavo had treated with contempt. He felt master of the situation, inasmuch that he had placed the major portion of the balance of money in hand, other than that which had been actually supplied by

Farrington, to his own credit in a Paris bank. He was prepared for all eventualities, and here he was promised the choicest of all his pickings—for the bleeding of the Duke of Ambury would set a seal upon previous accomplishments.

He rang a bell, and a man came, letting himself into the room with a key. He was an Italian with a peculiarly repulsive face; one of the small fry whom Poltavo had employed from time to time to do such work as was beneath his own dignity, or which promised an unnecessary measure of danger in its performance.

"Carlos," said Poltavo, speaking in Italian, "Antonio has been arrested, and has been taken to Calais by the police."

"That I know, signor," nodded the man. "He is very fortunate. I was afraid when the news came that he would be put into prison."

Poltavo smiled.

"The ways of the English police are beyond understanding," he said lightly. "Here was our Antonio, anxious and willing to kill the head of the detective department, and they release him! Is it not madness? At any rate, Antonio will not be coming back, because though they are mad, the police are not so foolish as to allow him to land again. I have telegraphed to our friend to go on to Paris and await me, and here let me say, Carlos,"—he tapped the table with the end of his penholder,—"that if you by ill-fortune should ever find yourself in the same position of our admirable and worthy Antonio, I beg that you will not send me telegrams."

"You may be assured, excellent signor," said the man with a little grin, "that I shall not send you telegrams, for I cannot write."

"A splendid deficiency," said Poltavo.

He took up a letter from the table.

"You will deliver this to a person who will meet you at the corner of Branson Square. The exact position I have already indicated to you."

The man nodded.

"This person will give you in exchange another letter. You will not return to me but you will go to your brother's house in Great Saffron Street, and outside that house you will see a man standing who wears a long overcoat. You will brush past him, and in doing so you will drop this envelope into his pocket—you understand?"

"Excellency, I quite understand," said the man.

"Go, and God be with you," said the pious Poltavo, sending forth a message which he believed would bring consternation and terror into the bosom of the Duke of Ambury.

It was late that night when Carlos Freggetti came down a steep declivity into Great Saffron Street and walked swiftly along that deserted thoroughfare till he came to his brother's house. His brother was a respectable Italian artisan, engaged by an asphalt company in London. Near the narrow door of the tenement in which his relative lived, a stranger stood, apparently awaiting some one. Carlos, in passing him, stumbled and apologized under his breath. At that moment he slipped the letter into the other's pocket. His quick eyes noted the identity of the stranger. It was Poltavo. No one else was in the street, and in the dim light even the keenest of eyes would not have seen the transfer of the envelope. Poltavo strolled to the end of the thoroughfare, jumped into the taxicab which was waiting and reached his house after various transferences of cabs without encountering any of T. B.'s watchful agents. In his room he opened the letter with an anxious air. Would Ambury agree to the exorbitant sum he had demanded? And if he did not agree, what sum would he be prepared to pay as the price of the blackmailer's silence? The first words brought relief to him.

"I am willing to pay the sum you ask, although I think you are guilty of a dastardly crime," read the letter, "and since you seem to suspect my bonafides, I shall choose, as an agent to carry the money to you, an old labourer on my Lancashire estate who will be quite ignorant of the business in hand, and who will give you the money in exchange for the marriage certificate. If you will choose a rendezvous where you can meet, a rendezvous which fulfills all your requirements as to privacy, I will undertake to have my man on the spot at the time you wish."

There was a triumphant smile on Poltavo's face as he folded the letter.

"Now," he said half aloud, "now, my friend Farrington, you and I will part company. You have ceased to be of any service to me; your value has decreased in the same proportion as my desire for freedom has advanced. Fifty thousand pounds!" he repeated admiringly. "Ernesto, you have a happy time before you. All the continent of Europe is at your feet, and this sad England is behind you. Congratulations, *amigo*!"

The question of the rendezvous was an important one. Though he read into the letter an eagerness on the part of his victim to do anything to avoid the scandal and the exposure which Poltavo threatened, yet he did not trust him. The old farm labourer was a good idea, but where could they meet? When Poltavo had kidnapped Frank Doughton he had intended taking him to a little house he had hired in the East End of London. The journey to the Secret House was a mere blind to throw suspicion upon Farrington and to put the police off the real track. The car would have returned to London, and under the influence of a drug he had intended to smuggle Frank into the small house at West Ham, where he was to be detained until the period which Farrington had stipulated had expired.

But the transfer of money in the house was a different matter. The place could be surrounded by police. No, it must be an open space; such a space as would enable Poltavo to command a clear view on every side.

Why not Great Bradley, he thought, after a while? Again he would be serving two purposes. He would be leading the police to the Secret House, and he would have the mansion of mystery and all its resources as a refuge in case anything went wrong at the last moment. He could, in the worst extremity, explain that he was collecting the money on behalf of Farrington.

Yes, Great Bradley and the wild stretch of down on the south of the town was the place. He made his arrangements accordingly.

CHAPTER XVIII

It was three days after the exchange of letters that Count Poltavo, in the rough tweeds of a country gentleman—a garb which hardly suited his figure or presence—strolled carelessly across the downs, making his way to their highest point, a great rolling slope, from the crest of which a man could see half a dozen miles in every direction.

The sky was overcast and a chill wind blew; it was such a day upon which he might be certain no pleasure-seekers would be abroad. To his left, half hidden in the furthermost shelter of the downs, veiled as it was for ever under a haze of blue grey smoke, lay Great Bradley, with its chimneys and its busy industrial life. To his right he caught a glimpse of the square ugly façade of the Secret House, half hidden by the encircling trees. To its right was a chimney stack from which a lazy feather of smoke was drifting. Behind him the old engine house of the deserted mines, and to the right of that the pretty little cottage from which a week before Lady Constance Dex had so mysteriously disappeared, and which in consequence had been an object of pilgrimage for the whole countryside.

But Lady Constance Dex's disappearance had become a nine days' wonder. There were many explanations offered for her unexpected absence. The police of the country were hunting systematically and leisurely, and only T. B. and those in his immediate confidence were satisfied that the missing woman was less than two miles away from the scene of her disappearance.

Count Poltavo had armed himself with a pair of field-glasses, and now he carefully scrutinized all the roads which led to the downs. A motor-car, absurdly diminutive from the distance, came spinning along the winding white road two miles away. He watched it as it mounted the one hill and descended the other, and kept his glasses on it until it vanished in a cloud of dust on the London road. Then he saw what he sought. Coming across the downs a mile away was the bent figure of a man who stopped now and again to look about, as though uncertain as to the direction he should take.

Poltavo, lying flat upon the ground, his glasses fixed upon the man, waited, watching the slow progress with lazy interest.

He saw an old man, white-bearded and grey-haired, carrying his hat in his hand as he walked. His rough homespun clothing, his collarless shirt open at the throat, the plaid scarf around his neck, all these Poltavo saw through his powerful glasses and was satisfied.

This was not the kind of man to play tricks, he smiled to himself. Poltavo's precautions had been of an elaborate nature. Three roads led to the downs, and in positions at equal distances from where he stood he had placed three cars. He was ready for all emergencies. If he had to fly, then whichever way of escape was necessary would bring him to a means of placing a distance between himself and any possible pursuer.

The old man came nearer. Poltavo made a hasty but narrow survey of the messenger.

"Good," he said.

He walked to meet the old man.

"You have a letter for me?" he inquired.

The other glanced at him suspiciously.

"Name?" he asked gruffly.

"My name," said the smiling Pole, "is Poltavo."

Slowly the messenger groped in his pockets and produced a heavy package. "You've got to give me something," he said.

Poltavo handed over a sealed packet, receiving in exchange the messenger's.

Again Poltavo shot a smiling glance at this sturdy old man. Save for the beard and the grey hair which showed beneath the broad-brimmed, wide-awake hat, this might have been a young man.

"This is an historic meeting," Poltavo went on gaily. His heart was light and his spirits as buoyant as ever they had been in his life. All the

prospects which this envelope, now bulging in his pocket, promised, rose vividly before his eyes.

"Tell me your name, my old friend, that I may carry it with me, and on some occasion which is not yet, that I may toast your health."

"My name," said the old man, "is T. B. Smith, and I shall take you into custody on a charge of attempting to extort money by blackmail."

Poltavo sprang back, his face ashen. One hand dived for his pistol-pocket, but before he could reach it T. B. was at his throat. That moment the Pole felt two arms gripping him, two steel bands they seemed, and likely to crush his arms into his very body. Then he went over with the full weight of the detective upon him, and was momentarily stunned by the shock. He came to himself rapidly, but not quickly enough. He was conscious of something cold about his wrists, and a none too kindly hand dragged him to his feet. T. B. with his white beard all awry was a comical figure, but Poltavo had no sense of humour at that moment.

"I think I have you at last, my friend," said T. B. pleasantly. He was busy removing his disguise and wiping his face clean of the grease paint, which had been necessary, with a handkerchief which was already grimy with his exertions.

"You will have some difficulty in proving anything against me," said the other defiantly; "there is only you and I, and my word is as good as yours. As to the Duke of Ambury——"

T. B. laughed, a long chuckling laugh of delight.

"My poor man," he said pityingly, "there is no Duke of Ambury. I depended somewhat upon your ignorance of English nobility, but I confess that I did not think you would fall so quickly to the bait. The Dukedom of Ambury ceased to exist two hundred years ago. It is one of those titles which have fallen into disuse. Ambury Castle, from which the letters were addressed to you, is a small suburban villa on the outskirts of Bolton, the rent of which," he said carefully, "is, I believe, some forty pounds a year. We English have a greater imagination than you credit us with, Count," he went on, "and imagination takes no more common flight than the namings of the small dwellings of our humble fellow-citizens."

He took his prisoner by the arm and led him across the downs.

"What are you going to do with me?" asked Poltavo.

"I shall first of all take you to Great Bradley police station, and then I shall convey you to London," said T. B. "I have three warrants for you, including an extradition warrant issued on behalf of the Russian Government, but I think they may have to wait a little while before they obtain any satisfaction for your past misdeeds."

The direction they took led them to Moor Cottage. In a quarter of an hour a force of police would be on the spot, for T. B. had timed his arrangements almost to the minute. He opened the door of the cottage and pushed his prisoner inside.

"We will avoid the study," he smiled; "you probably know our mutual friend Lady Constance Dex disappeared under somewhat extraordinary circumstances from that room, and since I have every wish to keep you, we will take the drawing-room as a temporary prison."

He opened the door of the little room in which the piano was, and indicated to his captive to sit in one of the deep-seated chairs.

"Now, my friend," said T. B., "we have a chance of mutual understanding. I do not wish to disguise from you the fact that you are liable to a very heavy sentence. That you are only an agent I am aware, but in this particular case you were acting entirely on your own account. You have made elaborate and thorough preparations for leaving England."

Poltavo smiled.

"That is true," he said, frankly.

T. B. nodded.

"I have seen your trunks all beautifully new, and imposingly labelled," he smiled, "and I have searched them."

Poltavo sat, his elbows on his knees, reflectively smoothing his moustache with his manacled hands.

"Is there any way I can get out of this?" he asked, after a while.

"You can make things much easier for yourself," replied T. B. quietly.

"In what way?"

"By telling me all you know about Farrington and giving me any information you can about the Secret House. Where, for instance, is Lady Constance Dex?"

The other shrugged his shoulders.

"She is alive, I can tell you that. I had a letter from Fall in which he hinted as much. I do not know how they captured her, or the circumstances of the case. All I can tell you is that she is perfectly well and being looked after. You see Farrington had to take her—she shot at him once—hastened his disappearance in fact, and there was evidence that she was planning further reprisals. As to the mysteries of the Secret House," he said, frankly, "I know little or nothing. Farrington, of course, is——"

"Montague Fallock," said T. B. quietly. "I know that also."

"Then what else do you want to know?" asked the other, in surprise. "I am perfectly willing, if you can make it easy for me, to tell you everything. The man who is known as Moole is a half-witted old farm labourer who was picked up by Farrington some years ago to serve his purpose. He is the man who unknowingly poses as a millionaire. It is his estate which Farrington is supposed to be administering. You see," he explained, "this rather takes off the suspicion which naturally attaches to a house which nobody visits, and it gives the inmates a certain amount of protection."

"That I understand," said T. B.; "it is, as you say, an ingenious idea—what of Fall?"

Poltavo shrugged his shoulders.

"You know as much of him as I. There are, however, many things which you may not know," he went on slowly, "and of these there is one which you would pay a high price to learn. You will never take Farrington."

"May I ask why?" asked T. B. interestedly.

"That is my secret," said the other; "that is the secret I am willing to sell you."

"And the price?" asked T. B. after a pause.

"The price is my freedom," said the other boldly. "I know you can do anything with the police. As yet, no charge has been made against me. At the most, it is merely a question of attempting to obtain money by a trick —and even so you will have some difficulty in proving that I am guilty. Yes, I know you will deny this, but I have some knowledge of the law, Mr. Smith, and I have also some small experience of English juries. It is not the English law that I am afraid of, and it is not the sentence which your judges will pass upon me which fills me with apprehension. I am afraid of my treatment at the hands of the Russian Government."

He shivered a little.

"It is because I wish to avoid extradition that I make this offer. Put things right for me, and I will place in your hands, not only the secret of Farrington's scheme for escape, but also the full list of his agents through the country. You will find them in no books," he said with a smile; "my stay in the Secret House was mainly occupied from morning till night in memorizing those names and those addresses."

T. B. looked at him thoughtfully.

"There is something in what you say," he said. "I must have a moment to consider your offer."

He heard a noise from the road without and pulled aside the blind. A car had driven up and was discharging a little knot of plain clothes Scotland Yard men. Amongst them he recognized Ela.

"I shall take the liberty of locking you in this room for a few moments whilst I consult my friends," said T. B.

He went out, turned the key in the lock and put it in his pocket. Outside he met Ela.

"Have you got him?" asked the detective.

T. B. nodded.

"I have taken him," he said; "moreover, I rather fancy I have got the whole outfit in my hands."

"The Secret House?" asked Ela eagerly.

"Everything," said T. B.; "it all depends upon what we can do with Poltavo. If we can avoid bringing him before a magistrate, I can smash this organization. I know it is contrary to the law, but it is in the interests of the law. How many men have we available?"

"There are a hundred and fifty in the town of Great Bradley itself," said Ela calmly; "half of them local constabulary, and half of them our own men."

"Send a man down to order them to take up a position round the Secret House, allow nobody to leave it, stop all motor-cars approaching or departing from the house, and above all things no car is to leave Great Bradley without its occupants being carefully scrutinized. What's that?" he turned suddenly.

A sudden muffled scream had broken into the conversation and it had come from the inside of the cottage.

"Quick!" snapped T. B.

He sprang into the passage of the cottage, reached the door of the room where he had left his prisoner, slipped the key in the lock with an unerring hand and flung open the door.

The room was empty.

CHAPTER XIX

Farrington and Dr. Fall were closeted together in the latter's office. Something had happened, which was responsible for the gloom on the face of the usually imperturbable doctor, and for the red rage which glowered in the older man's eyes.

"You are sure of this?" he asked.

"Quite sure," said Dr. Fall briefly; "he is making every preparation to leave London. His trunks went away from Charing Cross last night for Paris. He has let his house and collected the rent in advance, and he has practically sold the furniture. There can be no question whatever that our friend has betrayed us."

"He would not dare," breathed Farrington.

The veins stood out on his forehead; he was controlling his passionate temper by a supreme effort.

"I saved this man from beggary, Fall; I took the dog out of the gutter, and I gave him a chance when he had already forfeited his life. He would not dare!"

"My experience of criminals of this character," said Dr. Fall calmly, "is that they will dare anything. You see, he is a particularly obnoxious specimen of his race; all suaveness, treachery, and remorseless energy. He would betray you; he would betray his own brother. Did he not shoot his father—or his alleged father, some years ago? I asked you not to trust him, Farrington; if I had had my way, he would never have left this house."

Farrington shook his head.

"It was for the girl's sake I let him go. Yes, yes," he went on, seeing the look of surprise in the other's face, "it was necessary that I should have somebody who stood in fear of me, who would further my plans in that direction. The marriage was necessary."

"You have been, if you will pardon my expressing the opinion," said Dr. Fall moodily, "just a little bit sentimental, Farrington."

The other turned on him with an oath.

"I want none of your opinions," he said gruffly. "You will never understand how I feel about this child. I took her from her dead father, who was one of my best friends, and I confess, that in the early days the thought of exploiting her fortune did occur to me. But as the years passed she grew towards me—a new and a beautiful influence in life, Fall. It was something that I had never had before, a factor which had never occurred in my stormy career. I grew to love the child, to love her more than I love money, and that is saying a lot. I wanted to do the right thing for her, and when my speculations were going wrong and I had to borrow from her fortune I never had any doubt but what I should be able to pay it back. When all the money went,"—his voice sank until it was little more than a whisper,—"and I realized that I had ruined the one human being in the world whom I loved, I took the step which of all my crimes I have most regretted. I sent George Doughton out of the way in order that I might scheme to marry Doris to the Tollington millionaire. For I knew the man we were seeking was Doughton. I killed him," he said defiantly, "for the sake of his son's wife. Oh, the irony of it!" He raised his hand with a harsh laugh. "The comedy of it! As to Poltavo," he went on more calmly, "I let him go because, as I say, I wanted him to further my object. That he failed, or that he was remiss, does not affect the argument. Doris is safely married," he mused; "if she does not love her husband now, she will love him in time. She respects Frank Doughton, and every day that passes will solidify that respect. I know Doris, and I know something of her secret thoughts and her secret wishes. She will forget me,"—his voice shook, —"please God she will forget me."

He changed the subject quickly.

"Have you heard from Poltavo this morning?"

"Nothing at all," said Fall; "he has been communicating with somebody or other, and the usual letters have been passing. Our man says that he has a big coup on, but upon that Poltavo has not informed us."

"If I thought he was going to play us false——"

"What would you do?" asked Fall quietly. "He is out of our hands now."

There was a little buzz in one corner of the room, and Fall turned his startled gaze upon the other.

"From the signal tower," he said. "I wonder what is wrong."

High above the house was one square solitary tower, in which, day and night, a watcher was stationed. Fall went to the telephone and took down the receiver. He spoke a few words and listened, then he hung up the receiver again and turned to Farrington.

"Poltavo is in Great Bradley," he said; "one of our men has seen him and signalled to the house."

"In Great Bradley!" Farrington's eyes narrowed. "What is he doing here?"

"What was his car doing here the other day," asked Fall, "when he kidnapped Frank Doughton? It was here to throw suspicion on us and take suspicion off himself, the most obvious thing in the world."

Again the buzzer sounded, and again Fall carried on a conversation with the man on the roof in a low tone.

"Poltavo is on the downs," he said; "he has evidently come to meet somebody; the look-out says he can see him from the tower through his glasses, and that there is a man making his way towards him."

"Let us see for ourselves," said Farrington.

They passed out of the room into another, opened what appeared to be a cupboard door, but which was in reality one of the innumerable elevators with which the house was furnished, and for the working of which the great electrical plant was so necessary.

They stepped into the lift, and in a few seconds had reached the interior of the tower, with its glass-paned observation windows and its telescopes. One of the foreign workmen, whom Farrington employed, was carefully

scrutinizing the distant downs through a telescope which stood upon a large tripod.

"There he is," he said.

Farrington looked. There was no mistaking Poltavo, but who the other man was, an old man doubled with age, his white beard floating in the wind, Farrington could not say; he could only conjecture.

Dr. Fall, searching the downs with another telescope, was equally in the dark.

"This is the intermediary," said Farrington at last.

They watched the meeting, saw the exchange of the letters, and Farrington uttered a curse. Then suddenly he saw the other leap upon Poltavo and witnessed the brief struggle on the ground. Saw the glitter of handcuffs and turned with a white face to the doctor.

"My God!" he whispered. "Trapped!"

For the space of a few seconds they looked one at the other.

"Will he betray us?" asked Farrington, voicing the unspoken thoughts of Fall.

"He will betray us as much as he can," said the other. "We must watch and see what happens. If he takes him into town, we are lost."

"Is there any sign of police?" asked Farrington.

They scanned the horizon, but there was no evidence of a lurking force, and they turned to watch T. B. Smith and his prisoner making their slow way across the downs. For five minutes they stood watching, then Fall uttered an exclamation.

"They are going to the cottage!" he said, and again the men's eyes met.

"Impossible," said Farrington, but there was a little glint in his eye which spoke of the hope behind the word.

Again an interval of silence. Three pairs of eyes followed the men.

"It is the cottage!" said Fall. "Quick!"

In an instant the two men were in the lift and shooting downwards; they did not stop till they reached the basement.

"You have a pistol?" asked Farrington.

Fall nodded. They quitted the lift and walked swiftly along a vaulted corridor, lighted at intervals with lamps set in niches. On their way they passed a door made in the solid wall to their left.

"We must get her out of this, if necessary," said Farrington in a low voice. "She is not giving any trouble?"

Dr. Fall shook his head.

"A most tactful prisoner," he said, dryly.

At the end of the corridor was another door. Fall fitted a key and swung open the heavy iron portal and the two men passed through to a darkened chamber. Fall found the switch and illuminated the apartment. It was a little room innocent of windows, and lit as all the rest of the basement was by cornice lamps. In one corner was a grey-painted iron door. This Fall pushed aside on its noiseless runners. There was another elevator here. The two men stepped in and the lift sunk and sunk until it seemed as though it would never come to the end. It stopped at last, and the men stepped out into a rock-hewn gallery.

It was easy to see that this was one of the old disused galleries of the old mine over which the house was built. Fall found the switch he sought and instantly the corridor was flooded with bright light.

On a set of rails which ran the whole length of the gallery to a point which was out of sight from where they stood, was a small trolley. It was unlike the average trolley in that it was obviously electrically driven. A third rail supplied the energy, and the controlling levers were at the driver's hand.

Farrington climbed to the seat, and his companion followed, and with a whirr of wheels and a splutter of sparks where the motor brush caught the rail, the little trolley drove forward at full speed.

They slowed at the gentle curves, increased speed again when any uninterrupted length of gallery gave them encouragement, and after five minutes' travel Farrington pulled back the lever and applied the brake. They stepped out into a huge chamber similar to that which they had just left. There was the inevitable lift set, as it seemed, in the heart of the rock, though in reality it was a bricked space. The two men entered and the lift rose noiselessly.

"We will go up slowly," whispered Fall in the other's ear; "it will not do to make a noise or to arouse any suspicions; we must not forget that we have T. B. Smith to deal with."

Farrington nodded, and presently the lift stopped of its own accord. They made no attempt to open whatever door was before them. They could hear voices: one was T. B.'s, and the other was unmistakably Poltavo's, and Poltavo was speaking.

Poltavo was offering in his eager way to betray the men who sat in the darkness listening to his treachery. They heard the motor-car's arrival outside, and presently T. B.'s voice announcing his temporary retirement. They heard the slam of the door, and the key click in the lock, and then Dr. Fall stepped forward, pressed a spring in the rough woodwork in front of him and one of the panels of the room slid silently back.

Poltavo did not see his visitors until they stood over him, then he read in those hateful faces which were turned toward him an unmistakable forecast of his doom.

"What do you want?" he almost whispered.

"Do not raise your voice," said Farrington in the same tone, "or you are a dead man." He held the point of a knife at the other's throat.

"To where are you taking me?" asked Poltavo, ghastly white of face and shaking from head to foot.

"We are taking you to a place where your opportunity for betraying us will be a mighty small one," said Fall.

There was a horrible smile on his thin lips, and Poltavo, with a premonition of what awaited him beyond the tunnel, forgot the menacing knife at his throat and screamed.

Hands gripped him and strangled the cry as it escaped him. Something heavy struck him behind the ear and he lost consciousness. He awoke to find himself travelling smoothly along the rock gallery. He was half lying, half reclining on Fall's knees. He did not attempt to move; he knew now that he was in mortal peril of his life. No word was spoken when he was dragged roughly from the car, placed in another elevator and whirled upwards, emerging into a little chamber at the end of the underground corridor which ran beneath the Secret House.

A door was opened and he was thrust in without a word. He heard the clang of the steel door behind him, and the lights came on to show him that once again he was in the underground room where he had been confined before.

There was the table, there was the heavy chair, there in the far corner of the room was the barred entrance to the other elevator. Anyway he was free from the police; that was something. He was safe just so long as it suited the book of Farrington and his friend to keep him safe. What would they do? What excuse could he offer? They had overheard the conversation between himself and T. B., he knew that, and cursed his folly. He ought to have kept away from Moor Cottage. He knew there was something sinister about the place, but T. B. should have known that even better than he. Why had T. B. left him?

These and a thousand other thoughts shot through his mind as he paced the vaulted apartment. They were in no hurry to feed him. He had almost forgotten what time it was; whether it was day or night in that underground vault into which no ray of sunlight ever penetrated. They had left him with the handcuffs on his wrists; they would come and relieve him of these encumbrances. What were their plans with him? He felt his pockets carefully. T. B. had taken away the only weapon he had had, and for the first time for many years Count Poltavo was unarmed.

His heart was beating with painful rapidity and his breath came laboriously. He was terror-stricken. He turned to find the door through

which he had come, and to his surprise he could not see it. So far as he could detect, the stone wall ran without a break from one end of the apartment to the other. Escape could not lie that way; of that he was satisfied. There was nothing to do but to wait, with whatever patience he could summon, to discover their plans. He did not doubt that he was to suffer. He had forfeited all right to their confidence, but if this was to be the only consequence of his ill-doing he was not greatly worried. Count Poltavo, as he had boasted before in this identical room, had been in some tight corners and had faced death in many strange and terrible guises, but the inevitability of doom was never so impressed upon his mind as it was at this moment when he lay guarded by a hundred secret forces in the tomb of the Secret House.

He had one hope, a faint one, that T. B. would discover the method of his exit from the room in Moor Cottage and would track him here.

Evidently the occupants of the Secret House had the same fear, for even here, in the quietness of his underground prison, Poltavo could hear strange whining noises, rumbling, and groaning and grinding, as though the whole of the house were changing its construction.

He had not long to wait for news. A corner lift came swiftly down and Fall stepped briskly towards his prisoner.

"T. B. Smith is in the house," he said, "and is making an inspection; he will be down here in a moment. In these circumstances I shall have to betray one of the secrets of this house." He caught the other roughly by the arm and half led, half dragged, him to a corner of the room. Handcuffed as he was, Poltavo could offer no resistance. Dr. Fall apparently only touched one portion of the wall, but he must have moved, either with his foot or with his hand, some particularly powerful spring, for a section of the stone wall swung backwards revealing a black gap.

"Get in there," said Fall, and pushed him into the darkness.

A few moments later T. B. Smith, accompanied by three detectives, inspected the room which Poltavo had left. There was no sign of the man, no evidence of his having so recently been an occupant of his prison house. For an interminable time Poltavo stood in the darkness. He found

he was in a small cell-like apartment with apparently no outlet save that through which he had come.

He was able to breathe without difficulty, for the perfect system of ventilation throughout the dungeons of the Secret House had been its architect's greatest triumph.

It seemed hours that he waited there, though in reality it was less than twenty minutes after his entrance that the door swung open again and he was called out.

Farrington was in the room now, Farrington with his trusty lieutenant, and behind them the one-eyed Italian desperado whom Poltavo remembered seeing in the power house one day, when he had been allowed the privilege of inspection.

Some slight change had been made in the room since he was there last. Poltavo's nerves were in such a condition that he was sensitive to this variation. He saw now what the change was. The table had been drawn back leaving the chair where it was fixed.

Yes, it was a fixed chair, he remembered that and wondered why it had been screwed to the wood block floor. Dr. Fall and the engineer grasped him roughly and hurried him across the room, thrusting him into the chair.

"What are you going to do?" asked Poltavo, white as death.

"That you shall see."

Deftly they strapped him to the chair; his wrists and elbows were securely fastened to the arms, and his ankles to the legs of the massive piece of furniture.

From where he sat Poltavo confronted Farrington, but the big man's mask-like face did not move, nor his eyes waver as he surveyed his treacherous prisoner. Then Fall knelt down and did something, and Poltavo heard the ripping and tearing of cloth.

They were slitting up each trouser leg, and he could not understand why.

"Is this a joke?" he asked with a desperate attempt at airiness.

No reply was made. Poltavo watched his captors curiously. What was the object of it all? The two men busy at the chair lifted a number of curious-looking objects from the floor; they clamped one on each wrist, and he felt the cold surface of some instrument pressing against each calf. Still he did not realize the danger, or the grim determination of these men whose secret he would have betrayed.

"Mr. Farrington," he appealed to the big man, "let us have an understanding. I have played my game and lost."

"You have indeed," said Farrington.

They were the first words he had spoken.

"Give me enough to get out of the country," Poltavo appealed, "just the money that I have in my pocket, and I promise you that I will never trouble you again."

"My friend," said Farrington, "I have trusted you too long. You forced yourself upon me when I did not desire you, you thwarted me at every turn, you betrayed me whenever it was possible to betray me, or whenever it was to your advantage to do so, and I am determined that you shall have no other chance of doing me an injury."

"What is this foolery?" asked Poltavo, in a mixture of blind fear and rage. They had unlocked the handcuffs and taken them off him, and now for the first time Poltavo noticed that the curious bronze clamps on his wrists were attached by thick green cords to a plug in the wall.

He shrieked aloud as he saw this, and the full horror of the situation flashed upon him.

"My God," he screamed, "you are not going to kill me?"

Farrington nodded slowly.

"We are going to kill you painlessly, Poltavo," he said. "It was your life or ours. We do not desire to cause you unnecessary suffering, but here is the end of the adventure for you, my friend."

"You are not going to electrocute me?" croaked the man in the chair, in a hoarse cracked voice. "Don't say that you are going to electrocute me, Farrington! It is diabolical, it is terrible. Give me a chance of life! Give me a pistol, give me a knife, but fight me fair. Treat me as you will; hand me to the police, anything but this; for God's sake, Farrington, don't do this!"

The doctor reached down and lifted a leather helmet from the floor and placed it gently over the doomed man's head.

"Don't do it, Farrington." Poltavo's muffled voice came painfully from behind the leather screen. "Don't! I swear I will not betray you."

Farrington made a little signal and the doctor walked to the wall and placed his hand upon a black switch.

"I will not betray you," said the man in the chair in hollow tones. "Give me a chance. I will not tell them anything that you——"

He did not speak again, for the black switch had been pressed down and death came with merciful swiftness.

They stood watching the figure. A slight quivering of the hands and then Farrington nodded and the doctor turned the switch over again.

Rapidly they unfastened the straps, and the limp thing which was once human, with a brain to think and a capacity for life and love, slipped out of the chair in an inanimate heap upon the ground.

So passed Ernesto Poltavo, an adventurer and a villain, in the prime of his life.

Farrington looked down upon the body with sombre eyes and shrugged his shoulders.

He had opened his mouth to speak and Fall had walked to the switchboard and was about to put the deadly apparatus out of gear, when a sharp voice made them both turn.

"Hands up!" it said.

The stone door, through which Poltavo had passed to his doom from the corridor without, was wide open, and in the doorway stood T. B. and a little behind him Ela, and in T. B.'s hand was a pistol.

CHAPTER XX

T. B. Smith's inspection of the Secret House had yielded nothing satisfactory; he had not expected that it would; he was perfectly satisfied that the keen, shrewd brains which dominated the menage would remove any trace there was of foul play.

"Where now?" asked Ela, as they turned out of the house.

"Back to Moor Cottage," said T. B., climbing into the car. "I am certain that we are on the verge of our big discovery. There is a way out of the cottage by some underground chamber, a way by which first Lady Constance and then Poltavo were smuggled, and if it is necessary I am going to smash every panel in those two ground floor rooms, but I will find the way in to Mr. Farrington's mystery house."

For half an hour the two men were engaged in the room from which Poltavo had been taken. They probed with centre bits and gimlets into every portion of the room.

The first discovery that they made was that the oaken panels of the chamber were backed with sheet iron or steel.

"It is a hopeless job; we shall have to get another kind of smith here to tear down all the panellings," said T. B., lighting the gloom of his despair with a little flash of humour.

He fingered the tiny locket absently and opened it again.

"It is absurd," he laughed helplessly. "Here is the solution in these simple words, and yet we brainy folk from the Yard cannot understand them!"

"God sav the Keng!" said Ela ruefully. "I wonder how on earth that is going to help us."

A gasp from T. B. made him turn his face to his chief.

T. B. Smith was pointing at the piano. In two strides he was across the room, and sitting on the stool he lifted the cover and struck a chord. The instrument sounded a little flat and apparently had not received the attention of a tuner for some time.

"I am going to play 'God save the King,'" said T. B. with a light in his eyes, "and I think something is going to happen."

Slowly he pounded forth the familiar tune; from beginning to end he played it, and when he had finished he looked at Ela.

"Try it in another key," suggested Ela, and again T. B. played the anthem. He was nearing the last few bars when there was a click and he leapt up. One long panel had disappeared from the side of the wall. For a moment the two men looked at one another. They were alone in the house, although a policeman was within call. The main force was gathered in the vicinity of the Secret House.

T. B. flashed the light of his indispensable and inseparable little electric lamp into the dark interior.

"I will go in first and see what happens," he said.

"I think we will both go together," said Ela grimly.

"There is a switch here," said T. B.

He pulled it down and a small lamp glowed, illuminating a tiny lift cage.

"And here I presume are the necessary controlling buttons," said T. B., pointing to a number of white discs; "we will try this one."

He pressed the button and instantly the cage began to fall. It came to a standstill after a while and the men stepped out.

"Part of the old working," said T. B.; "a very ingenious idea."

He flashed his lamp over the walls to find the electrical connection. They were here, as they were at the other end, perfectly accessible. An instant later the long corridor was lighted up.

"By heavens," said T. B. admiringly, "they have even got an underground tramway; look here!"

At this tiny terminus there were two branches of rails and a car was in waiting. A few minutes later T. B. Smith had reached the other end of the mine gallery and was seeking the second elevator.

"Here we are," he said—"everything run by electricity. I thought that power house of Farrington's had a pretty stiff job, and now I see how heavy is the load which it has to carry. Step carefully into this," he continued, "and make a careful note of the way we are going. I think we must be about a hundred feet below the level of the earth; just gauge it roughly as we go up. Here we go."

He pressed a button and up went the lift. They passed out of the little mine chamber, carefully propping back the swing door, and made their way along the corridor.

"This looks like an apartment," said T. B., as he stopped before a red-painted steel door in one of the walls. He pressed it gently, but it did not yield. He made a further examination, but there was no keyhole visible.

"This is either worked by a hidden spring or it does not work at all," he said in a low voice.

"If it is a spring," said Ela, "I will find it."

His sensitive hands went up and down the surface of the door and presently they stopped.

"There is something which is little larger than a pin hole," he said. He took from his pocket a general utility knife and slipped out a thin steel needle. "Pipe cleaners may be very useful," he said, and pressed the long slender bodkin into the aperture. Instantly, and without sound, the door opened.

T. B. was the first to go in, revolver in hand. He found himself in a room which, even if it were a prison, was a well-disguised prison. The walls were hung with costly tapestry, the carpet under foot was thick and velvety and the furniture which garnished the room was of a most costly and luxurious description.

"Lady Constance!" gasped T. B. in surprise.

A woman who was sitting in a chair near the reading lamp rose quickly and turned her startled gaze to the detective.

"Mr. Smith," she said, and ran towards him. "Oh, thank God you have come!"

She grasped him by his two arms; she was half hysterical in that moment of her release, and was babbling an incoherent string of words; a description of her capture—her fear—her gratitude—all in an inextricably confused rush of half completed phrases.

"Sit down, Lady Constance," said T. B. gently; "collect yourself and try to remember—have you seen Poltavo?"

"Poltavo?" she said, startled into coherence. "No, is he here?"

"He is somewhere here," said T. B. "I am seeking for him now. Will you stay here or will you come with us?"

"I would rather come with you," she said with a shiver.

They passed through the door together.

"Do all these doors open upon rooms similar to this?" asked T. B.

"I believe there are a number of underground cells," she answered in a whisper, "but the principal one is that which is near." She pointed to a red-painted door some twenty paces away from the one from which they were emerging. There was another pause whilst Ela repeated his examination of the door.

Apparently they all worked on the pick system, a method which medieval conspirators favoured, and which the Italian workmen probably imported from the land of their birth; a land which has given the world the Borgias and the Medicis and the Visconti.

"Stay here," said T. B. in a low voice, and Lady Constance shrank back against the wall.

Ela pressed in his little needle and again the result was satisfactory. The door opened slowly and T. B. stepped in.

He stood for a moment trying to understand all that the terrible scene signified. The limp body on the floor; the two remorseless men standing close by; Farrington with folded arms and his eye glowering down upon the dead man at his feet. Fall at the switchboard.

Then T. B.'s revolver rose swiftly.

"Hands up!" he said.

The words were hardly out of his mouth when the room was plunged in darkness, his companion was flung violently backward as the electrical control came into operation and the door slammed in Ela's face. He pressed it without avail. He brought to his aid the little needle, but this time the lock would not move.

Ela's face went chalk white.

"My God!" he gasped, "they've got T. B.!"

He stood for a moment in indecision. He had visualized the scene and knew what fate would befall his chief.

"Back to the gallery," he said harshly, and led the way, holding the woman's arm in support. He found his way without difficulty to the lift, sprang into it, after Lady Constance, and pressed the button.... Now they were speeding along the sparking rail ... now they were in the lift rising swiftly to the room in Moor Cottage. T. B.'s car was outside.

"You had better come with me," said Ela quickly.

Lady Constance jumped into the car after him.

"To the Secret House," said Ela to the chauffeur, and as the car drove forward he turned to the woman at his side.

"I will put you amongst your friends in a few moments," he said; "at present I dare not risk the loss of a second."

"But what will they do?"

"I pretty well know what they will do," said Ela grimly. "Farrington is playing his last hand, and T. B. Smith is to be his last victim."

In the darkness of the underground chamber T. B. faced his enemies, striving to pierce the gloom, his finger in position upon the delicate trigger of his automatic pistol.

"Do not move," he said softly; "I will shoot without any hesitation."

"There is no need to shoot," said the suave voice of the doctor; "the lights went out, quite by accident, I assure you, and you and your friends have no need to fear."

T. B. groped his way along the wall, his revolver extended. In the gloom he felt rather than saw the bulky figure of the doctor and reached out his hand gingerly.

Then something touched the outstretched palm, something that in ordinary circumstances might have felt like the rough points of a bass broom. T. B. was flung violently backwards and fell heavily to the ground.

"Get him into the chair quick," he heard Farrington's voice say. "That was a good idea of yours, doctor."

"Just a sprayed wire," said Dr. Fall complacently; "it is a pretty useful check upon a man. You took a wonderful assistant when you pressed electricity to your aid, Farrington."

The lights were all on now, and T. B. was being strapped to the chair. He had recovered from the shock, but he had recovered too late. In the interval of his unconsciousness the body of Poltavo had been removed out of his sight. They were doing to him all that they had done to Poltavo. He felt the electrodes at his calf and on his wrists and clenched his teeth, for he knew in what desperate strait he was.

"Well, Mr. Smith," said Farrington pleasantly, "I am afraid you have got yourself into rather a mess. Where is the other man?" he asked quickly. He

looked at Fall, and the doctor returned his gaze.

"I forgot the other man," said Fall slowly; "in the corridor outside." He went to the invisible door and it opened at his touch. He was out of the room a few minutes, and returned looking old and drawn.

"He has got away," he said; "the woman has gone too."

Farrington nodded.

"What does he matter?" he asked roughly; "they know as much as they are likely to know. Put the control on the door."

Fall turned over a switch and the other renewed his attention to T. B.

"You know exactly how you are situated, Mr. Smith," said Farrington, "and now I am going to tell you exactly how you may escape from your position."

"I shall be interested to learn," said T. B. coolly, "but I warn you before you tell me that if my escape is contingent upon your own, then I am afraid I am doomed to dissolution."

The other nodded.

"As you surmise," he said, "your escape is indeed contingent upon mine and that of my friends. My terms to you are that you shall pass me out of England. I know you are going to tell me that you have not the power, but I am as well acquainted with the extraordinary privileges of your department as you are. I know that you can take me out of the Secret House and land me in Calais to-morrow morning, and there is not one man throughout the length and breadth of England who will say you nay. I offer you your life on condition that you do this, otherwise——"

"Otherwise?" asked T. B.

"Otherwise I shall kill you," said Farrington briefly, "just as I killed Poltavo. You are the worst enemy I have and the most dangerous. I have always marked you down as one whose attention was to be avoided, and I shall probably kill you with less compunction because I know that but for you I should not have been forced to live this mad dog's life that has been

mine for the past few months. You will be interested, Mr. Smith, to learn that you nearly had me once. You see the whole wing of the house in which Mr. Moole lies," he smiled, "works on the principle of a huge elevator. The secret of the Secret House is really the secret of perfectly arranged lifts; that is to say," he went on, "I can take my room to the first floor and I can transport it to the fourth floor with greater ease than you can carry a chair from a basement to an attic."

"I guessed that much," said T. B. "Do you realize that you might have made a fortune as a practical electrician?"

Farrington smiled.

"I very much doubt it," he said coolly; "but my career and my wasted opportunities are of less interest to me at the moment than my future and yours. What are you going to do?"

T. B. smiled.

"I am going to do nothing," he said cheerfully, "unless it be that I am going to die, for I can imagine no circumstance or danger that threatens me or those I love best which would induce me to loose upon the world such dangerous criminals as yourself and your fellow-murderers. Your time has come, Farrington. Whether my time comes a little sooner or later does not alter the fact that you are within a month of your own death, whether you kill me or whether you let me go."

"You are a bold man to tell me that," said Farrington between his teeth.

T. B. saw from a glance at the blanched faces of the men that his words had struck home.

"If you imagine you can escape," T. B. went on unconcernedly, "why, I think you are wasting valuable time which might be better utilized, for every moment of delay is a moment nearer to the gallows for both of you."

"My friend, you are urging your own death," said Fall.

"As to that," said T. B., shrugging his shoulders, "I have no means of foretelling, because I cannot look into the future any more than you, and if it is the will of Providence that I should die in the execution of my duty, I

am as content to do so as any soldier upon the battle-field, for it seems to me," he continued half to himself, "that the arrayed enemies of society are more terrible, more formidable, and more dangerous than the massed enemies that a soldier is called upon to confront. They are only enemies for a period; for a time of madness which is called 'war'; but you in your lives are enemies to society for all time."

Fall exchanged glances with his superior, and Farrington nodded.

The doctor leant down and picked up the leather helmet, and placed it with the same tender care that he had displayed before over the head of his previous victim.

"I give you three minutes to decide," said Farrington.

"You are wasting three minutes," said the muffled voice of T. B. from under the helmet.

Nevertheless Farrington took out his watch and held it in his unshaking palm; for the space of a hundred and eighty seconds there was no sound in the room save the loud ticking of the watch.

At the end of that time he replaced it in his pocket.

"Will you agree to do as I ask?" he said.

"No," was the reply with undiminished vigour.

"Let him have it," said Farrington savagely.

Dr. Fall put up his hand to the switch, and as he did so the lights flickered for a moment and slowly their brilliancy diminished.

"Quick," said Farrington, and the doctor brought the switch over just as the lights went out.

T. B. felt a sharp burning sensation that thrilled his whole being and then lost consciousness.

CHAPTER XXI

There was a group of police officers about the gates of the Secret House as the car bearing Ela and the woman came flying up.

The detective leapt out.

"They have taken T. B.," he said. He addressed a divisional inspector, who was in charge of the corps.

"Close up the cordon," he went on, "and all men who are armed follow me."

He raced up the garden path, but it was not toward the Secret House that he directed his steps; he made a detour through a little plantation to the power house.

A man stood at the door, a grimy-faced foreign workman who scowled at the intruders. He tried to pull the sliding doors to their place, but Ela caught the blue-coated man under the jaw and sent him sprawling into the interior.

In an instant the detective was inside, confronting more scowling workmen. A tall, good-looking man of middle age, evidently a decent artisan, was in control, and he came forward, a spanner in his hand, to repel the intruders.

But the pistol Ela carried was eloquent of his earnestness.

"Stand back," he said. "Are you in charge?"

The detective spoke Italian fluently.

"What does this mean, signor?" asked the foreman.

"It means that I give you three minutes to stop the dynamo."

"But that is impossible," said the other. "I cannot stop the dynamo; it is against all orders."

"Stop that dynamo," hissed Ela between his teeth. "Stop it at once, or you are a dead man."

The man hesitated, then walked to the great switchboard, brilliant with a score of lights.

"I will not do it," he said sulkily. "There is the signal; give it yourself."

A little red lamp suddenly glowed on the marble switchboard.

"What is that?" asked Ela.

"That is a signal from the lower rooms," said the man sullenly; "they want more power."

Ela turned on the man with a snarl, raised his pistol and there was murder in his eyes.

"Mercy!" gasped the Italian, and putting out his hand he grasped a long red switch marked 'Danger' and pulled it over. Instantly all the lights in the power house went dim, and the great whirling wheels slowed down and stopped. Only the light of day illuminated the power house. Ela, standing on the controlling platform, wiped his perspiring face with the back of a hand which was shaking as though with ague.

"I wonder if I was in time?" he muttered.

The big machinery hall was now alive with detectives.

"Take charge of every man," Ela ordered; "see that nobody touches any of these switches. Arrest stokers and keep them apart. Now you," he said, addressing the foreman in Italian, "you seem a decent fellow, and I am going to give you a chance of earning not only your freedom, but a substantial reward. I am a police officer and I have come to make an inspection of this house. You spoke of the lower rooms—do you know the way there?"

The man hesitated.

"The lift cannot work, signor," he said, with a shrug of his shoulders, "now that the electric current is stopped."

"Is there no other way?"

Again the man hesitated.

"There are stairs, signor," he stammered after a while, then continued rapidly: "If this is a crime and Signor Moole is an anarchist, I know nothing of it, I swear to you by the Virgin. I am an honest man from Padua, and I have no knowledge of such things as your Excellency speaks about."

Ela nodded.

"I am willing to believe that," he said in a milder tone. "Now, my friend, you shall undo a great deal of mischief that has been done by showing me the way to the underground rooms."

"I am at your service," said the man helplessly. "I call all men to witness that I have done my best to carry out the instructions which the padrone has given me."

He led the way out of the power house through a door which led to a large stretch of private garden behind the main building, across a well-kept lawn to an area basement which ran the whole length of the house.

In this, at the far end, was a door, and the man opened it with a key upon a bunch which he took from his pocket. They had to pass through two more doors before they came to the spiral staircase which led down into the gloomy depths beneath the Secret House.

To Ela's surprise they were illuminated and he feared that against his orders the dynamo had been restarted, but the man reassured him.

"They are from the storage batteries," he said. "There is sufficient to afford light all over the house, but not enough to give power."

The steps seemed never ending. Ela counted eighty-seven before at last they came to a landing from which one door opened. The detective noticed that the man employed the same method of entering here as he himself had done. A bodkin slipped into an almost invisible hole produced the mechanical unsealing of this doorway.

Ela stepped through the open door. Two lights burned dimly; he saw the strapped figure in the chair and his heart sank. He went forward at a run and Farrington was the first to hear him.

The big man turned, a revolver in his hand. There was a quick deafening report, and another, and a third. Ela stood up unmoved, unharmed, but Farrington, rocking as he staggered to the table, slid to the ground with a bullet through his heart.

"Take that man," said Ela, and in an instant Fall was handcuffed and secure.

Then Ela heard a silent sneeze and through the smoke from the revolver shots the voice of T. B. Smith, saying: "A pity it takes such ill-smelling powder to send our clever friend on his long journey."